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JUNE 2006

IN THESE TIMES

**WHY WITHDRAWAL FROM
IRAQ WON'T BE EASY**

THE IRAQ WAR—ON DRUGS

CHARTING A SANE COURSE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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BY CHRISTOPHER HAYES

Hooray for Hookergate!

ON APRIL 27, REPUBLICANS awoke to a PR disaster. Tucked away on page A6, a brief *Wall Street Journal* article updated the saga of former Rep. Randall “Duke” Cunningham (R-Calif.), who was convicted in March of taking bribes. Investigators were expanding their inquiry to determine whether, in addition to the \$600,000 he pocketed from defense contractor Brent Wilkes, Cunningham had also accepted the complimentary services of prostitutes.

The article further revealed that investigators were looking into the possibility that other members of Congress or their staff were being similarly serviced. Wilkes, it seems, was using a sketchy limousine company to connect his friends with escorts and making hospitality suites available in that most suggestive of Washington crash pads, the Watergate Hotel.

Hookergate was upon us.

While the mainstream media trod carefully, the blogosphere jumped in with both feet. Building on the reliable reporting of the *San Diego Union Tribune*, bloggers began cataloguing arcane details and trying to finger the targets of the widening investigation. The more the bloggers raked, the more muck they found. Shirlington Limousine, for example, Wilkes’ connection to a ready supply of prostitutes, turned out to have sweetheart contracts with Homeland Security and other federal agencies, even though its ex-con owner had a 62-page rap sheet.

Scrutiny soon settled upon the highest echelons of the CIA. Kyle “Dusty” Foggo, a bosom pal of Wilkes, and a mysterious person known as “Nine Fingers” were identified as frequent guests at Wilkes’ bacchanals. They turned out to be, respectively, the No. 3 man at the CIA and a former staffer for CIA Director Porter Goss when he was chair of the House committee on intelligence. Goss lasted a few days before tendering a hasty resignation. Foggo followed the next week.

Such is the power of Hookergate, and the best is still to come. It’s too early to say how damaging it will be, but it bids fair to

become a campaign-season train wreck. As scandals go, it’s certainly a twofer, casting a harsh light on both the Bush administration and congressional Republicans.

It’s unknown exactly who, or how many, but more congressmen are reportedly under investigation for their ties to Wilkes and co-conspirator Mitchell Wade. GOP strategist Ed Rollins opined—perhaps tactically—that as many as 15 members could eventually face grand juries.

To make matters worse, Republicans couldn’t get in front of this story. Goss’s departure was painfully clumsy, especially for a White House that stage-manages its every move. The extemporized “resignation”—with no replacement in sight, no explanation forthcoming—had “the unconvincing choreography of the Andropov-era Soviet Union,” as a UPI reporter put it.

The administration lamely tried to spin Goss’s exit as the consequence of a turf war he’d been fighting with intelligence czar John Negroponte. But soon it became clear that Goss, the hatchet man Bush and Cheney put in to purge the CIA of liberal bias, was hoist by his own petard. Competent management, much less leadership, at the agency clearly took a back seat to the more important job of ideological cleansing.

Ideological overreach plus mendacity plus two-fisted boodling. Sound familiar? Hookergate is the story of the Bush presidency, all wrapped up in one easy-to-understand scandal. Needless to say, this is a golden opportunity to take control of the campaign debate. Why not present the imbroglio as a rich object lesson in how the Republican Party governs?

Democratic strategists should take a leaf from the 2004 GOP playbook and work with the “netroots” to hammer this home. The bloggers are way ahead of other media in terms of analysis and even reporting, and they’re moving the debate.

Hookergate’s turning out to be a barrel of monkeys. And we haven’t even met the hookers yet.

—Dave Mulcahey

IN THESE TIMES

“With liberty and justice for all...”

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mixed reaction

QUID PRO QUO

THE QUID:

Where to begin with Rep. Alan Mollohan (D-W.Va.)? The \$2.1 million defense contract that Mollohan—the ranking Democrat on the House Ethics Committee before he resigned April 21—directed to a company headed by a long-time friend? The jump of his real estate and other assets from \$562,000 in 2000 to \$6.3 million in 2004? For brevity's sake, let's focus on his House Appropriations Committee work on behalf of the Vandalia Heritage Foundation, a historical preservation nonprofit, for which he has secured \$28 million in earmarks over the last five years.

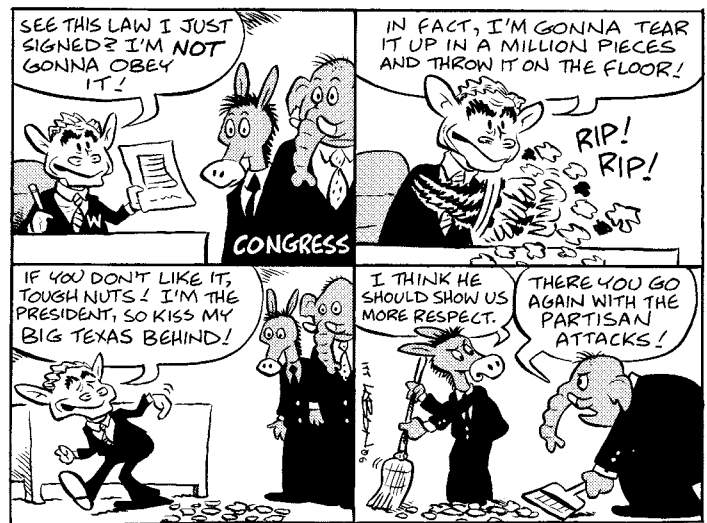
THE QUO:

Vandalia is headed by Laura Kuhns, a former Mollohan staffer. According to the National Legal and Policy Center, Kuhns and her husband co-own five properties in Bald Head Island, N.C.—worth a total of \$2 million—with Mollohan and his wife. The two families also recently became neighbors there, after the Mollohans purchased a \$1.45 million dollar oceanfront house, called the Peppervine House, right next to the Kuhn's home, known as Cape Fearless.

“ Our whole system is predicated on the erroneous idea that individuals are likely to hate the work they have chosen, but overwhelmingly love money. ”

—MARK GREIF, “GUT-LEVEL LEGISLATION, OR, REDISTRIBUTION.” *N+1* MAGAZINE. ISSUE FOUR.

LABANARAMA BY TERRY LABAN



the lexicon

grasstops: n. derived from grassroots

CURRENT USAGE: A favorite of consulting and strategy groups, the term piggybacks on the authenticity of the grassroots. “Grasstop activities rely on mobilizing ‘opinion leaders’ in the community,” boasts the Web site of Welchert & Britz, a political consulting group whose clients have included Democratic congressional candidates, as well as corporate heavies like Coca-Cola and General Mills. “By holding editorial board meetings with local newspapers, briefings for the chamber of commerce and generating messages from industry leaders, grasstops campaigns are effective methods for influencing public opinion.”

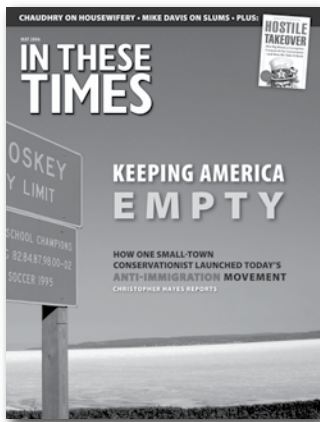
SYNONYM: Elites engaging in “revolution from above.”

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



letters



Tanton and His Critics

Although Christopher Hayes intended a velvet smear job on population activist John Tanton, the portrait of the gentle doctor nonetheless shone through as heroic ("Keeping America Empty," May). Because of immigration, U.S. population growth is already outstripping the Census Bureau's prediction of 1.18 billion people by the year 2100. Tanton must be admired for his foresight and willingness to commit to population stabilization in the most over-consumptive and wasteful society on earth. As to the claim that "The ultimate way to reduce immigration is ... to fix 'the poverty, population and distribution of wealth' in the countries that people are leaving"—well, we can only hold our collective breath until Hayes reveals how this will be accomplished. In the meantime population stabilization—like charity—begins at home.

*Tim Aaronson
El Cerrito, Calif.*

Reading about John Tanton and the Immigration Reform movement, I am reminded of Donald Barthelme's short

fairy-tale novel, *Snow White*, which I read as an English major at the University of Michigan in the '80s. My favorite word back then was "plenum," and I loved how Barthelme used it to describe the fear the seven dwarves had about losing their own identity to *Snow White*'s influence. That's my greatest issue with those who fear the "other" invading our country. What are we afraid of losing? Our imagined sense of control over our lives?

*Nessa McCasey
Grand Rapids, Mich.*

The gist of "Keeping America Empty" revealed the racist views of some of FAIR's supporters. However, my concern with the article is Hayes' dismissal of population as a problem. Our planet enters the 21st century with accelerating climate change, over-fished oceans, and dire shortages of clean water in many parts of the globe. With a projected population of 8 to 9 billion by 2050, it will take a united effort by all nations to stabilize a collapsing ecology. Food production cannot be assured with erratic climate change. Arguments about racist views will be meaningless unless we address these problems facing the human race and stop our bickering.

*Larry Little
Stone Mountain, Ga.*

Thanks for "Keeping America Empty." Unfortunately, the links between some American conservationists and anti-immigrant activities go way back. One hundred years ago, the wonderful women (mostly) and men

who started the bird-protection movement—a consumer movement to get wild-bird feathers off women's hats and clothes—were also infected with blatant biases. They organized themselves against the "great menace to our wildlife ... the immigrant population of Southern Europe." The big-time enemy then was ... the Italians! The early Audubon movement railed against "Italian atrocities" in the states, and pursued restrictions against unnaturalized Italians.

Sadly, I have seen too many environmentalists work to keep nature away from people, only one step removed from keeping those people away from our blessed landscape in the first place. People I have worked with on environmental issues in places like Central America are engaged in the opposite: creative sustainability and bringing people toward an appreciation of their natural heritage.

*Paul J. Baicich
Oxon Hill, Md.*

Thank you for running Christopher Hayes' "Keeping America Empty" on my efforts toward reform of our immigration laws. I thought it well done and a good contribution to the debate.

My main reservation is about the use of the word "anti-immigration" to characterize our efforts. We are no more anti-immigration (or anti-immigrant) than a person who goes on a diet is "anti-food." As with a new diet, we feel current circumstances warrant a different approach to immigration, which should continue but at a reduced and

revised level. The questions are how many people to admit, what skills they should bring to our country, and how to enforce the limits decided upon.

"Immigration reform" adequately describes our goal, just as "immigration reformers" characterizes who we are. We prefer these designations, or some equally neutral terms.

We hope you will call this important linguistic distinction concerning the "anti-" word to the attention of your headline and caption writers, as well as others working on the immigration question.

*John H. Tanton
Petoskey, Mich.*

CHRISTOPHER HAYES RESPONDS:

In an attempt to steer me away from the term "anti-immigration," Dr. Tanton offered the same diet analogy during one of our interviews. It's clever, but misleading. In the case of Tanton's hypothetical dieter, it goes without saying that food is a "good," an absolute necessity that the patient needs to survive. Obesity is too much of a good thing. But Tanton and his allies don't think that immigration is as vital to the nation as food is to the body. I don't think they view it as a good at all. I understand his sensitivity about language in this debate, but if you spend all your time discussing the costs and problems and negative effects of something, it's hard not to come to the conclusion that you are anti-that thing.

Incompetence Matters

David Moberg surprised me by writing that the Iraq war debacle "failed because

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Christopher Hayes interviews Jelpi Picou, the executive director of the Capital Appeals Project in New Orleans

An excerpt from *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy And the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* by Ali M. Ansari

Brian Cook blogs from YearlyKos, the annual DailyKos conference

Audio and video from our recent events with Slavoj Žižek and Studs Terkel.

it was a flawed strategy, not because of incompetent execution" ("How Do You Define Security?," May). Our invasion of Iraq—as grotesquely vile and illegal as it was and is—failed because it was “planned” and run by incompetent, amoral and closed-minded Bush administration officials. Top military and civilian leaders who disagreed were dumped. If we had moved in with sufficient force to take control of public facilities and, above all, with the Iraqi army intact and redirected so that all of those weapons and explosives would remain under some semblance of control, then Saddam could have been removed and the situation stabilized. I opposed the idea, but it could have succeeded.

Instead of calling for withdrawal, Democratic opposition should scoff at Republicans for suggesting that we should be expected to salvage the mess they have made, when the solution to the mess is to get rid of those responsible.

Steve Juniper
Berkeley, Calif.

Segregated Viewers

In “CW Network: Back in Black?” (April) Natalie Y. Moore writes, “On May 18,

the channel will announce its fall television lineup, and black viewers are looking to see what it includes for them.”

I hate what this implies—that black people only like TV shows if they are about black people. It also implies a multitude of other things; namely, that white people only like watching TV if the shows are about white people.

Kim Anderson
Murrieta, Calif.

CORRECTION

Due to an editing error in Silja J.A. Talvi's “No Room in Prison? Ship 'Em Off” (May), Kat Brady was incorrectly referred to as a man.

Home Advantage

Senior Editor Kurt Vonnegut faxes his word art our way every once in a while. Below is one of his latest contributions to enliven the office.

AMERICAN
IMPERIALISM
BEGINS
AT HOME,
AND WE ARE
THE NATIVES.



FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE

a radio forum sponsored by *In These Times*

Hear Laura S. Washington's interview with Anthony Arnone, author of the new book *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*.

Aaron Sarver also interviews *Middle East Report* editor Kaveh Ehsani on the rise to power of Iran's current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and relations

between Tehran and Washington.

Finally, hear comments from Juan Torres, whose son died while serving as an army specialist in Afghanistan. Torres is part of Gold Star Families for Peace, and has been traveling around the country speaking out against war.

To hear the show visit: fireontheprairie.com

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Dirty tricks: Did the White House help break the law to get Sen. John Sununu (R-N.H.) elected in 2002?

JACOB SILBERBERG/GETTY IMAGES

GOP Jams Democracy

How high did the Republicans' New Hampshire phone scheme reach?

BY PAUL KIEL

IN OCTOBER 2002, JUST weeks before Election Day, Chuck McGee, executive director of the New Hampshire Republican State Committee (NHRSC), hit on what seemed like a brilliant idea. His party faced a number of close races, the most important of which was the open seat Senate race between Rep. John Sununu (R) and Gov. Jeanne Shaheen (D). Every vote counted, as polls showed Sununu and Shaheen in a dead heat. Republicans had attacked with the standard array of ads and mailings, but McGee believed more could be done to ensure victory.

Drawing on his experience as a helicopter crew chief in the Marines, he hit on the elemental strategy of jamming the enemy's communications. "[I]n the military, it's common sense that if you can't communicate, you can't organize," McGee would later testify. The enemy here, of course, was the Democratic Party. McGee's idea was to make it impossible for

Democrats to organize on Election Day by flooding their phone banks with calls.

All McGee needed was the machinery to carry out his scheme. Being a military man, he went up the chain of command, to James Tobin, the regional director for both the Republican National Committee (RNC) and Republican National Senatorial Committee. McGee reported what he needed; Tobin, without a word of caution, gave him the number of Allen Raymond, who ran GOP Marketplace, a political consulting firm. McGee dialed up Raymond, and they struck a deal. For \$15,600, Raymond would arrange for repeated hang-up calls throughout Election Day to six numbers: five New Hampshire Democratic Party offices and a Manchester, N.H., firefighters union that was offering voters rides to the polls. The NHRSC footed the bill. Raymond in turn contracted the job out to an Idaho firm called Mylo Enterprises for \$2,500.

Although it might have been construed

as a dirty trick, McGee believed the jamming was an acceptable battle tactic, like a borderline defamatory attack ad. This was not a covert operation. It had been authorized. He'd spoken to Tobin, and he spoke about the scheme with NHRSC Chairman John Dowd on the eve of the election. On Election Day morning, everything was going according to plan.

It went downhill from there. Early that morning, Dowd consulted the NHRSC's legal counsel and was told that the jamming was illegal. He called McGee, who in turn called Raymond's partner to call it off. But Mylo's machines had been at it since 7:45 a.m. By the time they stopped, at 9:10 a.m., they'd jammed the six numbers for 85 minutes.

The ensuing Justice Department investigation has netted all four of the players at the heart of the conspiracy. McGee and Raymond pled guilty—McGee has already served his seven months in prison, and Raymond is currently serving his three-month sentence—and Tobin and Shaun Hansen, founder of Mylo Enterprises, were indicted. Tobin was convicted last December, mostly on the testimony of McGee and Raymond, and immediately mounted a vigorous appeal. Hansen will stand trial in October.

But did the conspiracy stop with those four? There are a number of reasons to think that it did not. First, all four have claimed that they did not know that the scheme was illegal. It might seem obvious that sabotaging get-out-the-vote operations would be illegal, but it appears the thought never occurred to these Republicans. Since those involved did not think that they were part of a criminal conspiracy, it seems likely that they spoke to others about it. McGee, for instance, called a number of other vendors before settling on GOP Marketplace to carry out the jamming. And this four-year-old crime was catapulted into the national spotlight in April when evidence emerged that Tobin had been in frequent contact with the White House.

An analysis by the Senate Majority Project, a Democratic advocacy group, of the phone records introduced at Tobin's trial showed that he called one number at the White House's Office of Political Affairs 110 times between Sept. 17 and Nov. 22,

2002, including 12 times on Election Day. According to Ken Mehlman, who ran the office in 2002, the number belonged to Alicia Davis, his deputy in charge of the Northeast. Mehlman has denied that Davis spoke to Tobin or anyone else about "the phone jamming incident." Even so, as part of their ongoing civil suit against state Republicans for voter fraud, Democrats want to depose senior White House officials about what they knew about the jamming. As *In These Times* went to press, they were awaiting a ruling on their request.

Mehlman's denial may be true—the calls are only circumstantial evidence. Perhaps more telling has been the RNC's decision to foot Tobin's \$2.8 million legal bill. RNC officials told the *Boston Globe* that they backed Tobin because "the charges arose from his official actions" and because he's "maintained his innocence."

The connections to the national Republican establishment grew more significant in April when the AP reported that GOP Marketplace had started up in 2000 with help from some big-hitters. Haley Barbour, former RNC chairman and current governor of Mississippi, owned a stake in

the firm, along with his investment partners Ed Rogers and Lanny Griffith (both well-connected conservative operatives). Carlyle Group Managing Director Ed Matthias also provided capital for the initial loan.

The only thing that could make the phone jamming scandal worse would be an appearance by Jack Abramoff. Sure enough, two of his tribal clients made inexplicable contributions to the NHRSC in October 2002. The Mississippi Choctaw cut a check on Oct. 10 for \$10,000; according to FEC records, it was deposited on Oct. 28 along with a \$5,000 check from the Agua Caliente. Together, the contributions total \$15,000, approximate to the \$15,600 the NHRSC paid for the jamming. There are no Indian tribes in New Hampshire. If Abramoff wasn't somehow a party to McGee's scheme, why did he direct money at New Hampshire? It is just one more open question emerging from McGee's brilliant idea, which continues to shine an unwelcome light on the Republican Party almost four years later.

PAUL KIEL is a reporter and blogger at TPM-Muckraker.com.

Iran Exports Anti-Gay Pogrom to Iraq

SHIITE DEATH SQUADS in Iraq are carrying out a campaign that targets gay men for murder. This so-called "sexual cleansing" is happening under the nose of the U.S. military—but American authorities in the Green Zone have refused to do anything about it.

The highly organized campaign of beatings, kidnappings and murders of Iraqi gays follows a death-to-gays fatwa issued last October by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the 77-year-old Iranian who is supreme spiritual leader of all Shia Muslims in Iraq. The fatwa, available on Sistani's official Web site, puts it this way, "The people involved [in homosexuality] should be killed in the worst, most severe way of killing."

This reign of terror represents the importation into Iraq of the anti-gay killings being carried out in the Islamic Republic of Iran (see "Iran's Anti-Gay Pogrom," January). The Iraqi murders are the work of the Badr Corps, the military arm of the Supreme Council of



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Supporters of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani rally in Najaf in April 2006.

the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The largest political formation in Iraq's Shia community, SCIRI was headquartered in exile in Tehran until Saddam Hussein's fall.

The SCIRI's Badr Corps wear the uniforms of Iraqi police, which is under the nominal control of the Interior Ministry. But the Interior Ministry has been heavily infiltrated by Iran. Moreover, the Badr Corps' salaries are paid by Iran—as a counselor of Sistani's, Ali Debbagh, who is a member of the Iraqi parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, confirmed in a Feb. 17 interview with *Le Monde*.

"We are receiving regular reports from our extensive network of contacts with underground gay activists and gay people in Iraq—intimidation, beatings, kidnappings and murders of gays have become an almost daily occurrence," says Ali Hili, a 33-year-old gay Iraqi exile in London. Five months ago, Hili, along with some 30 other gay Iraqis who have fled to the United Kingdom, founded the Iraqi LGBT U.K. group to document this persecution and support the victims. The group is accumulating evidence that Iranian agents are advising SCIRI. He says there are reports that Iranian agents have been involved in interrogations, questioning those arrested in Persian through translators.

Also, as in Iran, "Badr militants are entrapping gay men via Internet chat rooms," Hili says. "They arrange a date, and then beat and kill the victim. Males who are unmarried by the age of 30 or 35 are placed under surveillance on suspicion of being gay, as are effeminate men. They will be investigated and warned

to get married. Badr will typically give them a month to change their ways. If they don't, or if they fail to show evidence that they plan to get married, they will be arrested, disappear and eventually be found dead. The bodies are usually discovered with their hands bound behind their back, blindfolds over their eyes and bullet wounds to the back of the head."

Tahseen, a 31-year-old photography lab technician and underground gay activist, told me by telephone from Baghdad that, "Just last week, four gay people we know of were found dead. I am afraid to leave my room and go out in the street because I will be killed." He said that men who seem obviously gay "cannot walk in the street. My best friend was recently killed for being gay."

Tahseen also described the Badr Corps' Internet entrapment program, noting that "since Sistani's fatwa, the violence and killings have gotten much, much worse." Tahseen lives in a Baghdad apartment with his two brothers. "Right now, I have five gay men hiding in my room in fear of their lives," he said, the anguish audible in his voice. One man given refuge by Tahseen is Bashar, a 34-year-old

stage actor, who was forced into hiding after he and his family received death threats. He said that before he went underground, his house was raided several times by the Badr Corps. Fortunately, he was not at home.

"We desperately need protection!" Tahseen pleaded. "But, when we go to the Americans, they laugh at us and don't do anything."

According to Hili, "These assaults and murders have been reported by underground gay activists in Baghdad to the Green Zone, but the Americans don't want to upset the religious authorities, and so they do nothing and treat gay Iraqis with contempt or as an object of humor."

An April 10 report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs confirmed that gay Iraqis have been targeted for kidnapping and murder because of their sexual orientation. A week later, the BBC also carried a report, interviewing several victims. But U.S. major media have so far turned a blind eye to this systematic murder of gays in Iraq—and to the refusal of the U.S. occupier to do anything to stop it.

—Doug Ireland

act now



COKE KILLS

On Dec. 5, 1996, Isidro Segundo Gil was killed by paramilitaries contracted to suppress union activity at a Coca-Cola affiliated bottling plant in Colombia. Gil's murder is at the center of a lawsuit filed in July 2001 against Coca-Cola under the U.S. Alien Tort Act. That lawsuit spurred the creation of the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke, a network that provides anti-Coke resources to groups around the country. Campaign Director Ray Rogers sees the purpose of anti-Coke activism as twofold: To ensure "the safety of workers in bottling plants and to compensate victims and their family members." For more information, visit www.killercoke.org.

Biofuel Challenges Big Oil

AS OIL SURPASSES \$75 a barrel and gas hits \$3 a gallon, Americans might find it hard to imagine higher costs. But this auto-centric perspective overlooks the hidden costs of our petroleum addiction.

"The diesel engine is the backbone of the American economy," says Matt Atwood, project manager for Biodiesel Systems, LLC, an independent, Madison, Wis.-based start-up. "While accounting for only 12 percent of our total fuel consumption, it transports 70 percent of the nation's goods to market in shipping containers hauled by semi-trucks." Diesel also accounts for transporting 18 million tons of freight and 14 million people every day, to the tune of \$6 trillion a year, or about 51 percent of our GDP.

But what if diesel and petrochemicals could eventually be replaced by localized, sustainable industries of natural, renewable materials that are non-toxic and biodegradable?

This is the solution offered by the European Association for Bioindustries, known as EuropaBio. EuropaBio claims that industrial biotechnology has the potential to revolutionize industry by reducing pollution and waste, decreasing the use of energy, raw materials and water, and creating new materials—including biodegradable plastics and building materials, as well as renewable fuels like biodiesel and ethanol.

The key to industrial biotechnology, according to Novozymes, the "world leader" in enzyme technology, is new "cellulosic" technology. This involves genetically engineered enzymes that break down agricultural and forestry waste (and eventually, garbage and other unused organic matter) into usable energy and building material.

BIO (Biotechnology Industry Organization), the American biotech lobby group, has recently begun promoting a sustainable "bio-based economy." But opponents have called this new industrial paradigm everything from a "Trojan Horse to push the acceptance of GMO crops" to something "worse than fossil fuels."

They are concerned that the production of biofuel from crops consumes more energy than it produces, and therefore causes more air pollution, soil and

water depletion and pollution, forest destruction and harm to animals.

In April, John Peck of the National Family Farm Coalition led a panel discussion in Chicago on GMOs during BioETHICS 2006, a conference that took place the same week as the annual BIO convention. Peck dismissed ethanol outright, explaining its recent vogue as an industry response to "vast quantities of [surplus] low quality Bt [GMO] corn that has hardly any market" and that producers want to "dump it at taxpayer expense into domestic ethanol production."

Peck says the ethanol industry is almost exclusively controlled by Big Agro corporations like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, subsidized to the tune of \$.51 per gallon. But, BIO has not been shy about their enthusiasm for government funding of this industry. They have called it a means to "end U.S. addiction to oil" and they envision turning the "nation's breadbasket" into "the energy fields of the United States."

Regardless of whether ethanol is the answer, many believe that the paradigm shift itself is the imperative—but point out that it will take time and effort. "New technology must be introduced in gradients, and significant investment is needed to do it, regardless of corporate corruption," says Vinay Gupta, who worked on the Pentagon-co-funded report, "Winning the Oil Endgame."

Gupta points out that even the U.S. Department of Energy said a successful transition to the post-petroleum era would require several decades and a significant portion of our remaining fossil fuels. "The first step is conservation, which frees up the necessary oil to begin building the new infrastructure, like Biodiesel refineries," he says.

Novozymes CEO Steen Riisgaard acknowledged that concerns about arable land use are valid, but argued that cellulosic enzyme technology will redress them. EuropaBio claims that biomass is still attractive as a fuel source because "the CO₂ it produces is offset by the CO₂ absorbed by the plants that go into making it as they grow."

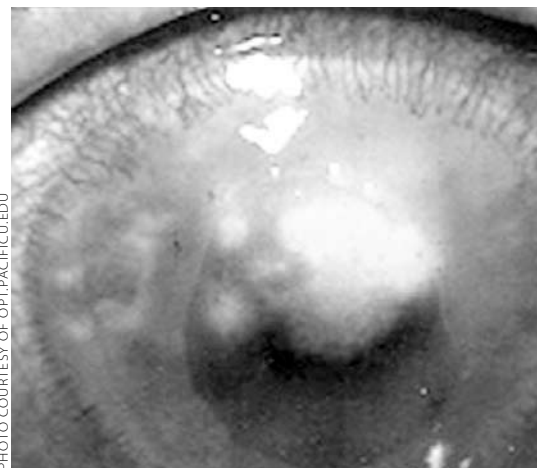
Both sides agree that biomass can be grown without planting vast new fields of GMO crops. Advocates like Peck believe that the burgeoning biomass supply market should remain localized and democratic, outside of corporate control.

This was one of the factors that con-

vinced Biodiesel Systems' Atwood to get into this business. "Biodiesel can take this faucet of money being pointed at other nations to purchase oil and point it back at Midwest farmers," he says.

But even for a new technology with clear benefits, principled opposition runs deep. "For almost every problem you can imagine, a non-biotech approach is cheaper, more effective, and healthier for land and people," says Friends of the Earth's Bill Freese. "Only political will is lacking. Many of us who oppose biotech do so in part for the sake of creating space for these healthier alternatives."

—Charles Shaw



An infection caused by *Fusarium* fungus destroys a human cornea.

Drug Warriors Push Eye-Eating Fungus

ON APRIL 16, the *New York Times* ran a full-page ad from contact lens producer Bausch and Lomb, announcing the recall of its "ReNu with MoistureLoc" rewetting solution, and warning the 30 million American wearers of soft contact lenses about *Fusarium keratitis*. This infection, first detected in Asia, has rapidly spread across the United States. It is caused by a mold-like fungus that can penetrate the cornea of soft contact lens wearers, causing redness and pain that can lead to blindness—requiring a corneal replacement.

That same week, the House of Representatives passed a provision to a bill requiring that the very same fungus be sprayed in "a major drug-producing country," such as Colombia. The bill's

sponsor was Rep. Mark Souder (R-Ind.) and its most vocal supporter was his colleague Dan Burton (R-Ind.), who has been promoting the fungus for almost a decade as key to winning the drug war.

The Colombian government has come out against it. And those entities of the U.S. government that have studied the use of *Fusarium* for more than 30 years don't recommend it either: The Office of National Drug Control Policy, also known as the Drug Czar's office, CIA, DEA, the State Department and the USDA have all concluded that the fungus is unsafe for humans and the environment.

"*Fusarium* species are capable of evolving rapidly. ... Mutagenicity is by far the most disturbing factor in attempting to use a *Fusarium* species as a bioherbicide," wrote David Struhs, then secretary of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, in a 1999 letter rejecting the use of the fungus against Florida's outdoor marijuana crop. "It is difficult, if not impossible, to control the spread of *Fusarium* species."

Mutation of the fungus allows it to attack other "hosts." The eye-eating *Fusarium* seems to be a result of such a mu-

tation. After all, the soft-contact lenses that it grows behind are a recent development—having only been commercially available since 1971.

The DEA stopped funding *Fusarium* research in the United States during the early '90s after it learned that *Fusarium* infections can be deadly in "immuno-compromised" people—not only AIDS patients and those with other illnesses, but also those who are severely malnourished. The University of the Andes in Bogotá has recently reported that 12 percent of Colombian children suffer from chronic malnutrition. Spraying this fungus on a vulnerable population could be perceived as using a biological weapon.

The CIA has been against the use of *Fusarium* to kill drug crops since at least 2000. At that time, one official told the *Times*, "I don't support using a product on a bunch of Colombian peasants that you wouldn't use against a bunch of red-necks growing marijuana in Kentucky."

A top scientist from the USDA, which has studied the fungus the longest, said that his agency "cannot support" its use. And the State Department, whose Bureau of International Narcotics and Law En-

forcement carries out drug crop eradication all over the world, does not support it, either.

In 2000, when Congress first passed "Plan Colombia," the Colombian aid package that ordered the use of the fungus in Colombia, President Clinton waived the part of the bill that dealt with the fungus because he thought its use would be perceived as biological warfare. At the same time, the Andean Community of Nations, an organization comprising Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, banned it within their territories.

So, who does support the spraying of the eye-eating fungus over other countries? Only a few adamant drug war jihadists in the House, led by Burton, who are frustrated by the lack of progress in the drug war.

The fungus provision has already passed the House, but the Senate version of the bill contains no similar language. Responsibility for a final decision rests on the conference committee where the House and Senate bills will be reconciled—scheduled to happen before this summer.

—Jeremy Bigwood

appall-o-meter

2.8 Thank You Sir, May I Have Another?

On the frontiers of managerial innovation, there is no room for kink. Alarm One, a California-based home-security company, has learned this very expensive lesson in a court of law. According to the *Fresno Bee*, the company and three of its managers will pay a combined \$1.7 million in damages to an ex-employee after having subjected her to several rounds of motivational spankings.

Janet Orlando, 54, argued in a lawsuit that, while working in the company's Fresno office as a saleswoman, she was compelled by managers on three separate occasions to present her buttocks before a room full of coworkers and, as they jeered, submit to a paddling. The spankings were part of a competition system the company had set up pitting



teams of salespersons against each other. The spankings were typically administered with the metal yard signs of competing companies.

Underperforming salespersons were routinely humiliated with other punishments as well, according to court documents, such as being forced to wear diapers and to eat baby food, and having pies thrown in their faces.

Since 2004, when Orlando filed her suit, the company has reverted to more conventional managerial theories.

4.3 Rich Dad, Homeless Dad

There are no second acts in American lives. Florida real estate is a different story. Consider the career of Johnny Moon Sr., a homeless man in Tampa whose life of petty crime and indigence seems to have been no obstacle to

his career as a real estate investor. At the time of his death last year, reports the *St. Petersburg Times*, Moon owned several houses with mortgage debt of \$614,000. Records show he flipped at least one of his shacks for a six-figure profit.

Many found it implausible that Moon was building a small empire. "He never had nothing much, no bank accounts or nothing like that," his sister commented to the *Times*. He was also on poor relief.

It now appears that Moon was an unwitting front man for a scam run by three con men, including Moon's son Johnny Moon Jr., the *Times* reports. The old man apparently played the part well enough, showing up at all the closings and signing all the requisite documents, even if he got arrested for shoplifting in between purchases.

Moon Sr. expired of pneumonia and malnutrition in the back bedroom of one of his fixer-uppers. Five months later, his loving son unloaded it for a 100 percent profit.

—Dave Mulcahey

NSA Thwarts Whistleblower

RUSSELL TICE HAS something to say, but there is no one he can talk to.

He explained as much at a mid-February hearing before the House Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations. Tice is a 20-year veteran of the United States intelligence network, having worked for Naval Intelligence, the Department of Defense and, most recently, the National Security Agency, where he held the position of intelligence analyst and capabilities officer. He has intimate knowledge of the innermost workings of the intelligence community, and wants to tell Congress about an NSA program that, he says, is unconstitutional and possibly criminal.

"What [the American people] know about is Hiroshima," he says. "What I'm going to tell you about is Nagasaki. I'm going to tell you about three Nagasakis." He is gagged, however, by the non-disclosure agreement he signed before becoming privy to top-secret government activities.

"Anyone who comes forward is really made into a martyr," says Beth Daley, Senior Investigator at the Project on Government Oversight, who works with whistleblowers. "It discourages other people from coming forward."

Tice's story is complex. In 2001, he suspected a co-worker at the Defense Intelligence Agency of being a double agent. He discreetly notified a DIA counter-intelligence officer, who told him that the FBI had investigated and there was nothing to his concerns. He still had his doubts, but when he brought up the matter again in 2003, the NSA's security office called him in for an emergency psychological evaluation. Despite having cleared him for duty after a routine examination nine months earlier, they declared him to be suffering from paranoia, and downgraded his clearance to "red badge" status. (An independent psychological evaluation has refuted this diagnosis.) He was reassigned to do odd jobs at the NSA motor pool, where he began to talk to other demoted red badge employees, and his supervisor accused him of try-

snapshot



CHICAGO— On May 1, more than 400,000 demonstrators rallied in downtown Grant Park to protest HR4437. The legislation calls for tougher border protection and harsher penalties for those caught. Similar rallies happened in every major city in the country. (Photo by Rachel Jefferson)

ing to form a union.

Tice asked the Inspectors General at both the NSA and the Department of Defense to investigate the matter, and neither claimed to find any impropriety. In February 2004, he told the NSA's security office that if he didn't receive a new investigation or get his security clearance back, he was going to talk to the press. Shortly after that, he lost his job.

The NSA denies that it practices retaliation against whistleblowers. Yet, Tice is still being monitored by the agency. In a January 9 letter to Tice, Renee Seymour, Director of NSA Special Access Programs Central Office, reminded him that he was required to report problems to "appropriately cleared individuals" at the NSA or Department of Defense before talking to any congressional committees—and reinforced that no one in either the House or the Senate Intelligence Committees was cleared to receive the information he wished to divulge.

James Bamford, author of *Body of Secrets* and *The Puzzle Palace*, is an expert on the inner workings of America's intelligence agencies. "The congressional intel-

ligence committees have lost total control over the intelligence communities," says Bamford. "You can't get any oversight or checks and balances; the Congress is protecting the White House and the White House can do whatever it wants."

Bamford notes that the last time congressional hearings on potential abuses of power were commonly held was when the Democrats controlled the executive branch and Republicans controlled the legislature. Because the same party controls both branches, he says, there is little incentive to investigate.

This is not entirely for lack of trying. At the subcommittee's hearing on national security whistleblowers, ranking Democrat Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) asked Chairman Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) to join him in writing a letter to both the Intelligence and Armed Services Committees regarding Tice's case. Shays agreed, and Kucinich spokesman Doug Gordon says they are currently discussing the matter.

"This shouldn't be a partisan issue, but that's not the attitude in this town," Tice says. "I fear for us."

—Jill Nelson

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

If Ken Lay Was Black ...



IF KENNETH LAY was black (and, say, a former athlete or fading pop star) and Jeffrey Skilling was the has-been lead of a '70s detective show (or a domestic diva), might the Enron trial be getting more front and center coverage?

After all, this was supposed to be the trial about the corporate corruptions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries—the case that dramatized the ongoing and urgent need for corporate oversight and reform. Yet, despite

reports that the trial's Houston courthouse is surrounded by media, it has received virtually no coverage. While lacking sex and murder, the case has a simple and dramatic story line: A couple of very greedy guys became obscenely rich while allegedly bilking their workers and stockholders out of millions, including, and especially, their pensions. So why is this narrative a flatliner?

The trial is in federal court—it cannot be televised. But since when has this stopped the networks from sending in their SWAT teams of sketch artists? That didn't stop the incessant coverage of Martha Stewart's trial, or Scott Peterson's, or Michael Jackson's—for Jackson's, the media hired actors in costume to perform what happened. Possibly because the collapse of Enron happened late in 2001, which now seems a lifetime ago in the 24-7 news cycle, news directors have deemed the Enron trial not newsworthy. Or, more likely, it's because Lay and Skilling are white male executives who also happen not to be celebrities.

According to the Tyndall report, during the first week of Kenneth Lay's long-awaited testimony, the Enron trial was not even among the top 10 stories covered by the three networks that week. Yes, the soaring price of oil and gas was deservedly the top story, but Enron was beat out by the irrelevant hoopla about whether the national anthem should be sung in Spanish—the sixth most-covered story that week.

During the course of the trial so far, ABC seems to have offered one brief "tell story" plus one slightly longer story about how Enron continued to pay accountants, lawyers and consultants even as it laid off about 4,500 people. "NBC Nightly News" appears not to have covered it at all, while the "Today Show" has offered only short rip-and-read accounts.

Over at CNN, when Skilling was being cross-examined, the "Nancy Grace Show" devoted an entire program—

punctuated by three sentences about the Enron trial—to, yes, the Natalee Holloway kidnapping story. Only Fox News covered—and derided—Kenneth Lay's blaming the news media, and particularly the *Wall Street Journal*, for Enron's problems.

And where is Lou Dobbs here, the man who, during the Dubai Port scheme brouhaha, aligned himself as the populist defender against corporate interests run amok? Clearly relishing all the coverage he got (including in this column) about his new style of advocacy reporting, Dobbs has become even more rancorous about immigration, losing the brief, refreshing edge he had on corporate irresponsibility.

It's not that the trial has been without drama, particularly during the cross-examinations. Prosecutor John Hueston reportedly shredded Kenneth Lay's affable mask and his story

about why he dumped so much Enron stock in such a short period of time, ridiculing Lay's tales of financial hardship. Between July 26 and Sept. 4, 2001, Lay reportedly sold \$24 million in Enron shares back to the company because his debts

A few greedy guys became obscenely rich while allegedly bilking workers and stockholders out of millions—why is this narrative a flatliner?

were being called in. Lay had a \$200,000 birthday party for his wife and other niceties to fund. "We had realized the American Dream and were living a very expensive lifestyle ... where it is difficult to turn off the spigot," he said.

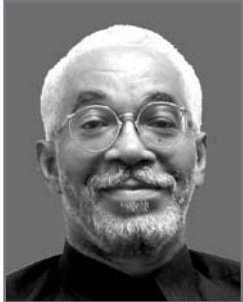
Hueston would have none of it and asked why he, Lay, did not sell any one of his multi-million dollar homes? According to the *Houston Chronicle's* blog, "During some of the prosecutor's questions, Lay is increasingly making what can be best described as a low groaning or growling noise that is audible in the media overflow room via his microphone." Does anyone besides me think that this is both juicy stuff and testimony Americans might want to hear just a tad more about?

Let's just remember: In 2000, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Lay made \$123 million in stock trades, nearly 10 times what he made in 1998. Jeffrey Skilling made more than \$62 million cashing in on his options that year, and both men continued to clean up in 2001 when, among other things, parts of California were experiencing rolling black-outs and metastasizing energy prices. (Recall the phone calls about screwing all the poor grannies in the state?) Approximately 4,500 Enron employees lost their jobs and their pensions, and stockholders were bilked out of their investments.

This is the current state and, without correction, the future of corporate America. This is why the most powerful media bias of all—the corporate bias—is so especially pernicious. ■

BY SALIM MUWAKKIL

Science: The Drug War's Latest Victim



THE WAR ON drugs is an attack on rationality. Reason lost yet another skirmish recently when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced on April 20 that “no sound scientific studies” supported the medical use of marijuana.

The announcement flatly contradicts the conclusion of virtually every major study on the efficacy of medical marijuana, including two performed by the government. In a *New York Times* article the following day, Dr. Jerry Avorn of Harvard Medical School said “this is yet another example of the FDA making pronouncements that seems to be driven more by ideology than science.”

Avorn’s criticism is one regularly leveled at the Bush administration, namely, that it is using politics to trump science. Last year, for example, the ACLU released a report titled “Science Under Siege” that detailed efforts by the Bush administration to hamper scientific inquiry in the name of ideology and national security.

The report found the administration has censored and prescreened scientific articles before publication, suppressed environmental and public health information, and increased restrictions on materials commonly used in basic scientific research.

For two years the Union of Concerned Scientists has circulated a petition statement which now contains the signatures of 9,000 U.S. scientists, including 49 Nobel Prize winners and 63 National Medal of Science recipients. The statement complains that the Bush administration advocates “policies that are not scientifically sound,” and sometimes has “misrepresented scientific knowledge and misled the public about the implication of its politics.” This comes on the heels of a host of other accusations against the administration—charges of censoring a NASA scientist on issues of global warming and burying data on the morning-after Plan B contraceptive.

But the FDA announcement on marijuana is perhaps the most blatant effort to ignore scientific reality. Critics charge that the statement was issued to bolster opponents of various medical marijuana initiatives that have passed in 11 states.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and John P. Walters, the director of national drug control policy (the Drug Czar) oppose the use of medical marijuana. The *Times* quoted Walters’ spokesman Tom Riley, who said the FDA’s

statement would put to rest what he called “the bizarre public discussion” that has helped legalize medical marijuana. But Riley failed to note that some of that discussion was sparked by an exhaustive DEA investigation into cannabis (the scientific name for marijuana) from 1986 to 1988. The comprehensive study examined evidence from doctors, patients and thousands of documents regarding marijuana’s medical utility.

Following a hearing on the study’s findings, the DEA’s administrative judge Francis L. Young released a ruling on Sept. 6, 1988, that noted, “Nearly all medicines have toxic, potentially lethal effects. But marijuana is not such a substance ...” Marijuana in its natural form, he said, “is one of the safest therapeutically active substances known to man. By any measure of rational analysis, marijuana can be safely

used within a supervised routine of medical care.”

He recommended that “(The) provisions of the (Controlled Substances) Act permit and require the transfer of marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule II. It would be unreasonable, arbitrary and

capricious for the DEA to continue to stand between those sufferers and the benefits of this substance.”

The New England Journal of Medicine, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Public Health Association, AIDS Action Council and dozens of other medical groups have endorsed medical marijuana. Anecdotal evidence from Oregon, one of the states that legalized marijuana’s medical uses, “adds to the mountain of data supporting the medicinal value of pot,” according to a May 1 editorial in the *Eugene (Ore.) Register-Guard*.

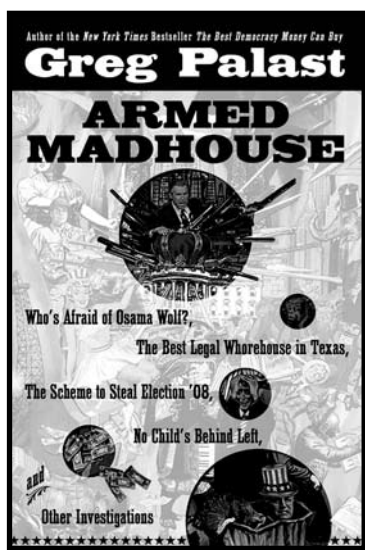
Despite this and a growing wealth of new information (particularly new research on cannabinoid medicine by Dr. Raphael Mechoulam out of Hebrew University in Jerusalem) regarding the therapeutic potential of marijuana and its various analogues, the U.S. government refuses to alter its prohibitionist restrictions on marijuana use or research.

Although the Bushites’ rejection of scientific reality is particularly egregious, governmental irrationality about marijuana has been bipartisan. Indeed, more people suffered pot arrests during the Clinton administration than in any other before or since. Washington, in general, seems particularly susceptible to distorted reasoning or magical thinking when considering this ancient herb.

Isn’t it a sign of mental disorder when distorted reasoning is unchanged by empirical evidence? What is it about marijuana that drives our politicians insane? ■

Despite a wealth of new information regarding the therapeutic potential of marijuana, the U.S. government refuses to alter its prohibitionist restrictions.

From the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*



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and the funniest."

—Randi Rhodes, Air America Radio

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exposes the abuses of today's global Empire and
calls on us to take action. Palast challenges us to
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LAURA S. WASHINGTON

Democrats Gear Up on the Ground



DEMOCRATS ARE SALIVATING at their November election prospects. No—I take that back—they are feverish with glee. Even conservative observers are suggesting that the Democratic Party has a superb shot at corralling the House and, dare we even consider, the Senate. According to a May 8 report in the *Washington Post*, Democrats need only 15 seats to win back the House. It's enough to give even Karl Rove the heebie-jeebies.

After years in the wilderness, a new Democratic Party is emerging, and not a moment too soon. One reason is contenders like Sheldon Whitehouse. (In an election year, that's got to be a winning moniker.) Whitehouse, a former Rhode Island attorney general and a Clinton-appointed U.S. attorney, recently stopped off in Chicago on a three-city fundraising tour in his race for the U.S. Senate in Rhode Island. He's up against Lincoln Chafee, the moderate Republican incumbent.

Whitehouse was pumped. He was not only pitching for dollars at a fundraiser at Chicago's swanky East Bank Club. He was cheerleading for a new Democratic Party.

We chatted. "There is a lot of optimism in the party that the excesses and misjudgments of the Bush administration are really being recognized by the American people," he says. "The spin tactics and fear mongering and manipulative Rove-ian efforts. ... Maybe it's 'fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.'"

Democratic chieftains are getting back to basics. Whitehouse notes that Howard Dean, chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), has delivered a raft of crucial ground-level resources to key races like his. Whitehouse, a veteran of Rhode Island politics for more than two decades, says that before Dean, the Dems were pulling more money out of the state than they were putting in. "Traditionally, the DNC came into town, more or less annually, to do an event for itself. It took the money out of Rhode Island, then disappeared."

The Whitehouse take on Dean: He wants "to rebuild the grassroots of the Democratic Party, not only as an immediate strategy, but also as a long-term strategy." Dean's plan: To fertilize America's school councils, city councils and state legislatures with potent progressive candidates and incubate that talent so that, 20 years down the road, they will be ready to roll into statewide and national offices.

Dean is just the opening act. When it comes to dialing for dollars, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) is an "animal," opines Whitehouse. The fundraising prowess of Schumer, chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, has reached mythic proportions in political circles. Whitehouse tells the tale of how Schumer would so assiduously plow through his assigned fundraising call sheets that he once ran out of prospects. No problem. "He would take the phone book and start calling numbers out of the phone book at random."

The party's investment in Whitehouse is paying off. He is running unopposed in the Rhode Island Democratic primary in September. An independent poll conducted April 26 by Rasmussen Reports placed him within three points of Chafee, and as of this writing, Whitehouse is beating the incumbent in fundraising.

There are yet other harbingers of Republican distress.

Back in Illinois, conservative activists, led by the Illinois Family Institute, have collected 345,199 signatures on petitions for "Protect Marriage Illinois," a

referendum, proposed for the November ballot, that would ask voters if the state legislature should amend the Illinois constitution to declare that "marriage between a man and a woman is the only legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State."

That's a direct steal from Karl Rove's playbook. In the run-up to the 2004 national elections, Rove masterminded a similar strategy nationwide, stoking turnout in the red states. Rick Garcia, political director for Equality Illinois, a gay rights group, says Republicans "need something to motivate hard-right voters to come out (so to speak)."

Michael Bauer is already out. The Chicago-based Democratic strategist and fundraiser says the time has come for Democratic activists to get pragmatic. For Bauer, that means backing Democrats like Rep. Harold Ford, Jr., who's running for the U.S. Senate seat in Tennessee. Ford's politics should be anathema to Bauer. You see, Ford voted for the Defense of Marriage Act. And Bauer is gay and married to a same-sex partner. Still, Bauer argues, "We are so desperate, as Democrats, to end this total Republican rule, the White House, the Congress, the Supreme Court," he says. So Bauer will host a fundraiser for Ford later this year. "This is one year that we are taking our Democrats, like it or not, as we find them."

Some might find that sentiment shamefully opportunistic. So what? Opportunity is the shoelace that binds the party together. ■

After years in the wilderness, a new Democratic Party is emerging, and not a moment too soon. One reason is candidates like Sheldon Whitehouse.

THE FIRST STONE

BY JOEL BLEIFUSS

Information Highway Robbers



WHAT MAKES THE Internet revolutionary is that it is democratic, open to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. That could soon change.

As *In These Times* went to press, the House was setting to vote on the “Communications Opportunity Promotion and Enhancement (COPE) Act of 2006,” a bill written by the telephone and cable TV corporations. Among other provisions, the act formally guts what is known as the First Amendment of the Internet—“network neutrality.” (The Senate will consider a similar bill in late May or early June.)

“Net neutrality ensures that the public can view the smallest blog just as easily as the largest corporate Web site and prevents companies like AT&T from rigging the playing field for only the highest-paying sites and services,” says Timothy Karr, the campaign director for Free Press, a media reform organization. Karr is coordinating *SavetheInternet.com*, a bipartisan coalition working to preserve network neutrality.

By not including network neutrality protections, the COPE Act upholds a 2005 ruling from the Federal Communications Commission that allows Internet service providers—telephone companies like AT&T and Verizon and cable companies like Comcast—to charge Web content creators a fee to make their sites readily accessible.

For example, take a filmmaker who wants to produce a documentary and distribute it to the public on his Web site. Under this new legislation, a service provider like AT&T would be able to charge the filmmaker for making his content available to their customers. Or, if AT&T did not ap-

prove of the documentary, it could refuse to let its customers access it all together—thereby allowing corporate censorship of a medium now characterized by the freewheeling exchange of ideas. In effect, the legislation allows the telecom industry to become the tollbooth operator on the information superhighway. The Internet will begin to look like cable TV, where viewers can only choose from available options.

SavetheInternet.com puts it this way: “The Internet has always been driven by innovation. Web sites and services succeeded or failed on their own merit. Without net neutrality, decisions now made collectively by millions of users will be made in corporate boardrooms.”

To harness the power of those millions is the goal of *Save the Internet.com*, whose key players in addition to Free Press include MoveOn, Punk Voter, Gun Owners of America and Consumers Union, along with bloggers like Glenn Reynolds at *InstaPundit* and Matt Stoller at *MyDD*. But as netizens are heeding a call to arms, the telecom industry has responded with a counterattack.

Karr observes, “How can you tell when corporations are running scared? When they wind up their coin-operated frontmen in Washington to unleash a tide of untruths upon the public.”

He is referring to the man leading the campaign against net neutrality, Mike “Industry Sock Puppet” McCurry, the former press spokesman for President Bill Clinton. McCurry is now a partner at Public Strategies, a PR firm whose motto is “managing campaigns for corporations around the clock, around the world.” In other words he is a 24-hour call boy for the telecom industry.

Using a classic PR technique, McCurry obfuscates the issue, invoking the First Amendment and dismissing

net neutrality as “regulation.” Writing on the Huffington Post, he addressed his critics: “The First Amendment of the Internet is under assault! ... The Internet has worked absent regulation, and now you want to introduce it for a solution to what?”

At Verizon, McCurry has gotten Peter B. Davidson, the senior vice president for federal government relations, on message. In a mass e-mail to the constituents of Congress members, Davidson told the voters “troubling ‘net neutrality’ provisions ... have the effect of regulating the Internet. ... Urge your representative, [insert name of representative], to support the swift passage of a clean, unencumbered cable-choice bill that will give consumers real choice and bring lower prices to the cable market WITHOUT regulating the Internet.”

McCurry is a masterful propagandist. Consider his 561-word Huffington Post screed against the slimy “net neuts.” Of the 26 sentences in this “essay,” 11 of them were rhetorical questions. Such questions allow a person to hide behind the guise of critical inquiry and make unsubstantiated allegations. For example, I might ask, “Mike McCurry, when did you decide to become an industry whore?” (Well, sometimes unsubstantiated.)

Another of McCurry’s facile ploys is to provide his readers with false choices. Consider this sentence: “I’d rather have a robust Internet that can handle the volume of traffic that we will put on it in the near future rather than a public Internet where we all wait in line for the next porno-spammer to let his content go before we get to have arguments like this.” That’s our choice?

Responding to McCurry’s nonsense, *ITT* Senior Editor David Sirota observed: “Mike McCurry is in the middle of one of those tailspins of dishonesty and contradiction that is so wildly out of control you just have to sit back, grab

some popcorn and watch with laugh.”

While Stoller, at MyDD, added: “Bashing Mike McCurry is not only fun, it’s important, as there must be a cost to his decision to sell us out.”

Such costs must also be borne by those in Congress who have decided to help gut net neutrality. The most prominent Democratic sponsor of the COPE Act is Rep. Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther who represents Chicago’s South Side.

How did this one-time militant morph into the Step ‘n’ Fetchit of the telecom industry? (Note the rhetorical question.) Perhaps the \$1 million that AT&T (formerly SBC) gave to the Rebirth of Englewood Community Development Corporation has something to do with it. Rush and his wife founded and serve on the board of this company, which employs their son and which used AT&T money to build the Bobby L. Rush Center for Community Technology.

Sheila Krumholz, the acting director of the Center for Responsive Politics, the nonprofit group that tracks the role of money in politics, noted, “It is a clear conflict of interest for Rep. Rush to weigh in on this bill, much less take a leadership role championing the position of a company that paid \$1 million to name a building after him.”

While the \$1 million might have completed the bill of sale, the bidding for Rush’s services began years ago. Since 1998, telecom companies have contrib-

uted \$204,000 to Rush’s reelection campaigns, with AT&T (and its predecessors) leading the pack at \$49,000.

In most mature democracies, this would be against the law, but until we enact meaningful campaign finance reform, such bribery is perfectly legal.

There are some honorable people in Congress. In the House, Rep. Ed Mar-

The Communications Opportunity Promotion and Enhancement Act of 2006 effectively allows the telecom industry to become the tollbooth operator on the information superhighway.

key (D-Mass.) has now introduced the Network Neutrality Act of 2006 that, in his words, “is designed to save the Internet and thwart those who seek to fundamentally and detrimentally alter the Internet as we know it.” However, the GOP-controlled Rules Committee is unlikely to let it on to the floor.

Meanwhile, in the Senate, Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) are currently drafting a net neutrality bill. Whether that bill has a future—along with the net as we know it—depends on the volume of public protest.

As a start, sign a petition that demands Congress to pass enforceable net neutrality provisions. Visit www.SavetheInternet.com and make your voice heard.

With God on Their Side

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT rallied behind Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell on May 2, choosing him as the GOP’s candidate for governor. Blackwell rode to victory on a platform that emphasized opposition to gay marriage, abortion and taxes.

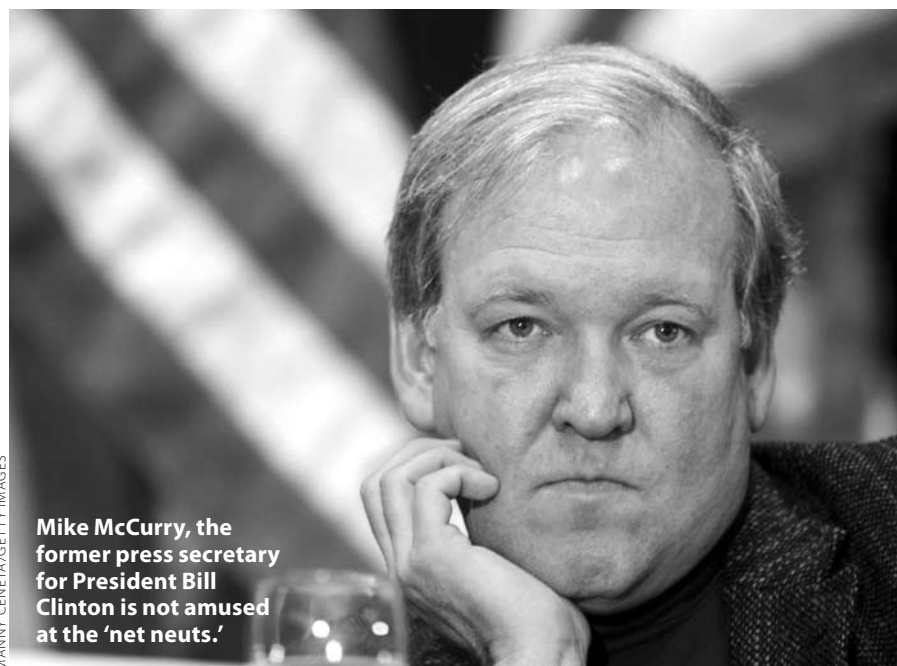
During the last presidential election, Blackwell, the state’s highest election official, served as Ohio chairman of the 2004 Bush-Cheney Campaign. He figures prominently in a book Steven Freeman and I have written, *Was the 2004 Presidential Election Stolen? Exit Polls, Election Fraud and the Official Count*, which is due out in June from Seven Stories.

Dubbed by the *Chicago Tribune* as the “anti-Obama,” Blackwell is a controversial figure. On Oct. 19, 2004, he made national news when, at a Christian right rally, he called on people of God to vote yes on Issue 1, Ohio’s anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment, saying, “I don’t know how many of you have a farming background, but I can tell you right now that notion even defies barnyard logic. ... The barnyard knows better.”

For Blackwell, there are two types of laws, man’s and God’s. Defying an order from a federal judge that he not restrict Ohio voters’ use of provisional ballots, Blackwell invoked Gandhi, Martin Luther King and St. Paul, all of whom went to jail for their beliefs. In Blackwell’s case, he was a martyr for the idea that people can only cast provisional ballots in the precinct where they should be registered, rather than in any precinct in the county in which they live.

The right-wing political strategist Paul Weyrich has called Blackwell “someone who is God-centered and who prays to do God’s will rather than his own.”

“He believes God wanted him as Secretary of State during 2004. It is difficult to disagree with that proposition,” wrote Weyrich, referring to Bush’s election as president. ■



Mike McCurry, the former press secretary for President Bill Clinton is not amused at the ‘net neuts.’

MANNY CENETA/GETTY IMAGES

CHARTING A SAN

BY LAKSHMI CHAUDHRY

When the planes crashed into the World Trade Center on September 11, “everything changed.” Or so people said. This terrifying post-9/11 world required new strategies, new weapons and an entirely new war—on terror, itself. Progressive critics were immediately dismissed by the keepers of conventional wisdom

as deluded fools with “a pre-9/11 world view.” But, as the past four-plus years have revealed, it is the Bush administration that has problem facing the reality of this new threat.

The so-called Bush doctrine is little more than old-fashioned Cold War strategy re-jiggered for a unipolar world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East, where U.S. policy consists of arming “friendly” tyrants, deposing or undermining the unfriendly ones in the name of “regime change,” and aligning ourselves with Israel against much of the Arab world. Sound familiar? Indeed, the very idea of fighting terrorists over there so as to avoid fighting them at home is just warmed-over “containment” talk. The significant break from the past is our flagrant disregard for our European allies, but this has less to do with 9/11 than the fall of the Soviet Union, which made us the sole superpower.

The “war on terror” is not just wrong-headed and counterproductive, it’s also entirely passé. Whatever the debatable merits of our Cold War strategy, it is clearly unsuited to the task of taking on the complex phenomenon of Islamic extremism.

No one nation is training or arming these militants. Of course, there is a global jihadist movement linking extremist groups and their adherents. Yet the reasons why such groups are appealing to Muslims in Britain are very different from those in Palestine or Kashmir or Indonesia. Terrorism, which is simultaneously transnational and local in nature, cannot be contained or deterred in the conventional sense. The fluid nature of the terrorist threat is equally challenging for progressives, since past peacemaking strategies—such as negotiating a détente—are impossible. In the end, political and military battles against terrorism have to be fought within local communities



IN THESE TIMES

E COURSE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

and, more importantly, by the people who live in them.

Given the complex realities of the post-9/11 world, what would an effective Middle East policy look like? Our roundtable discussion below tackles that very question with the help of four foreign policy experts from around the world. While such a discussion can't be expected to produce a brand new vision, it does outline the primary challenges that would face any president determined to change course in the Middle East. Their verdict is a sobering one.

Any future U.S. administration will be limited by the disastrous legacy of the Bush policies, which may well include two failed states in Iraq and Palestine. It's clear that there is no magic solution. For example, a good-faith effort in Palestine may help improve our image, but is unlikely to undo the fallout from Iraq. And as for that favorite solution of American progressives—turning to Europe—our allies show little will to do better than us. Where some of the roundtable participants suggest that a more pragmatic approach may simply be to do less, all agree that disengagement is not an option. Those of us secretly hoping that just staying out of the Middle East will make us and the world much safer will likely be disappointed.

But there are U.S. policies that can encourage Muslims around the world to become part of a truly global battle against terrorism, which—let's not forget—threatens the daily life of civilians in the Middle East.

A first step is to abandon overarching labels such as “Islamic fundamentalism.” We must learn to distinguish those who pose a real threat from those we merely disagree with; we may well need the support of the latter to defeat the first. A second step is to play a more constructive role in the Israel-Palestine peace process, preferably in close association with our European allies. Some also propose setting up regional organizations similar to EU, allowing the United States to cut back on its military presence, and offering transnational mobility to those who need it most, such as the Palestinians.

Most importantly, however, crafting a real alternative to the current Mideast policy requires accepting the grim reality that there are very few good options left. As Chris Toensing points out in his essay, “Why Exiting Iraq Won't be Easy,” (page 25), we should not fool ourselves about the consequences of our departure for the Iraqi people.

The confrontation with Iran is equally difficult. On our Web site, we include an excerpt from Ali M. Ansari's *Confronting Iran*, which reveals how our policies—the occupation of Iraq, botched nuclear negotiations—helped secure the power of Prime Minister Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a man who shares the conservative view of the world as a clash of civilizations. Ahmadinejad reminds the rest of us of the price of “staying the course” in our Middle East policy: the threat of an apocalyptic confrontation between religious extremists likely to engulf not just the region, but the world. However onerous, thankless, or grim the alternatives may be, we have no choice but to try to do better.

Our roundtable discussion included Brian Katulis, director of democracy and public diplomacy at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C.; Rosemary Hollis, director of research at Chatham House in London; Yezid Sayigh, professor of Middle East Studies in the Department of War Studies at King's College, who joined us from Lebanon; and Joel Beinin, professor of Middle East History at Stanford University. You can read an expanded version or listen to the audio recording on our Web site at www.inthesetimes.com.

Here is the foundational question: How should the United States view the Middle East, and what does that imply for the kind of role that we should play in this part of the world?

Brian, as someone who has been part of the policy-making establishment in Washington, what do you think?

BRIAN KATULIS: President Bush's latest national security strategy says, “We're a nation at war.” But characterizing it and framing it in this way—as he has for the last 4.5 years—has led us to use our military force improperly and to the detriment of using American political and diplomatic power. We need to move beyond this frame of the war on terror and start thinking about how to integrate the region more closely with the global economy and with the rest of the world. And how do you do it in a way that actually helps affirm this desire for progress that you see in many countries like Egypt and Palestine?

What about you, Rosemary? Do things look different to you from across the pond? What role do you think Europeans might play in such an effort in terms of reframing U.S. policy?

ROSEMARY HOLLIS: Europe's history is intimately connected with that of the Middle East region. Were the Europeans to take a step back and see that reality, then they might understand that there has been cultural, historical and economic interchange for centuries and that we're just in another phase of it. In this particular phase—which is the era of globalization—you have communities in Europe with roots and connections in the Middle East and vice versa. A way forward would be to think more expansively about the overall relationship rather than trying to see it as a kind of bilateral relationship between Europe as a bloc on the one hand and the Arabs et al. on the other hand.

How would the United States play into that?

HOLLIS: Washington would have to acknowledge that their view is bound to be different from Europe's. Whilst the United States may be welcome in taking a lead on some issues, that doesn't mean that Europe has no other part to play than trotting along behind the United States when called upon to put some cash in.

Yezid, I'm going to flip the question on its head for you. We all know that the United States is more unpopular than ever in the Middle East, but is there any desire for it to play a positive role in the region were it sincerely to attempt to do so?

YEZID SAYIGH: There's such a loss of credibility that anything the United States does for a while will continue to be regarded with a great deal of suspicion.

It needs to take a policy of least harm. In other words, it can act in ways that are less concerned with changing reality in a proactive way. The United States might try and say, "We want to avoid assisting authoritarian regimes. At the same time, it's not our business to go setting up new people as new leaders."

I as a liberal might welcome Western or U.S. support on certain issues, but I also know that at the end of the day it's only local people who are going to be able to make the real changes.

Especially if you consider that our relationship to Israel has been the lynchpin of U.S. foreign policy. Joel, how should we reconsider this relationship in terms of changing our strategy in the region?

JOEL BEININ: The United States has—since the end of World War II at least—supported the most regressive, backward regimes in the region because they have been its most important allies in the Cold

War; because they have guaranteed the free flow of oil at desirable prices to the west; because they have reinvested their petro-dollars in the stock markets of New York and London.

It's a pretty big task to revise that. But I would begin with Palestine and Israel. The United States needs to stop unreservedly supporting Israel. It needs to remove itself as the moderator of what is called the "peace process." The moderating role needs to be turned over to international bodies that are much less tied to one party in the conflict.

What you're saying is that we dramatically cut back on our commitment to Israel?

BEININ: No. I think that's actually the wrong way to put it. The United States has been committed to maintaining Israel as the strongest military power in the region because Israel is the country's most unreserved ally. It's not a question of reducing the American commitment to Israel. It's a question of redefining what it means to have a commitment.

What we should really be concerned with is ensuring physically secure, economically productive lives for the Israeli and Palestinian people. Then we'd insist that a reasonable peace agreement has to be reached immediately, and that international peacekeeping forces be inserted if necessary to police that agreement.

The United States would do Israel a favor if it would call it up short and say, "No. You are in the Middle East. Sorry, but that's where your country is located. Your neighbors are Arabs and Muslims, and you need to learn how to get along with them."

Rosemary, what do you think about that?

HOLLIS: The issue is more than just one between the Israelis and the Palestinians, with or without their respective allies. The refugee issue tells you the geography of the conflict today. More Palestinians are living outside the West Bank and Gaza than living inside the West Bank and Gaza. The refugees have spread around Lebanon; they make up more than half the population of Jordan. They're across the Gulf region, and they're certainly across Europe.

Do you agree that it's Europe that should be taking the lead?

HOLLIS: Yes, but I feel there is a latent hostility in Europe towards accepting that they had any role to play in the evolution of the conflict, any role to play in reconciliation with the Jews about the past that might open new ways for the future.

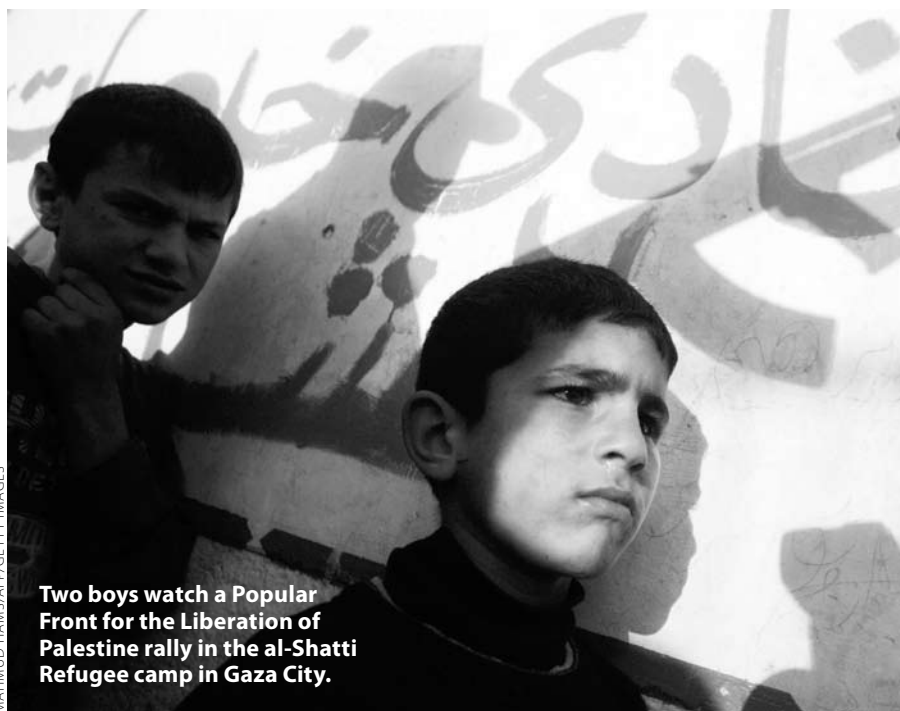
Brian, do you see room for a radical revision of our commitment to Israel that Joel describes?

KATULIS: I don't disagree with a lot of what Joel has to say, but his central proposal isn't terribly practical. If you ask the Europeans and others to take the lead, I don't think they will. Plus, I don't think that's the best way to advance our own national security interest. We need to do something that the Bush administration is not good at—working very closely with multilateral institutions, international institutions, and our European friends to figure out how we can advance certain ideas like the roadmap.

BEININ: I wasn't calling for the United States to disengage, but to acknowledge the limits of what the American role can be. The country can't reconvene some version of a Camp David Summit and have people believe that an acceptable outcome can come of that.

Yezid, if the United States were able to play a more credible role in the issue of Palestine would it help them in other situations such as Iran or the fallout from Iraq?

SAYIGH: The United States does need



MAHMUD HAMS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Two boys watch a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine rally in the al-Shatti Refugee camp in Gaza City.

to radically alter its approach to the Israel/Palestine conflict, but I don't think that it is measured solely by its policy on Israel and Palestine. When you come to Iraq, or, say, Iran or any of the other parts of the Middle East, there are local issues that for local people at least are nearly as important. I don't think that solving the Palestine problem will radi-

choosing a policy of regime change and by farming out our diplomacy to Russia and to our European friends. We need to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish and hope and dream it might be.

Yezid, do you think that part of it is also learning to have a more nuanced differentiation between the use of terror as a

it's making a huge mistake.

What steps could an American president could take to begin to tackle the challenge of terrorism?

SAYIGH: Terrorism is a real threat, but it's a threat to many actors, many governments, not just the United States. It requires intelligence efforts, human in-

A huge problem in the United States is this tendency to simplify matters into one overarching ideological framework. We had the Cold War, and now political analysts, media and lobbyists are gearing up to wage a new conflict with terrorism and Islam.

cally change everything.

The United States is stuck. We've heard mention of disengagement, but I object to loose talk of disengagement for a very simple reason. It's not an option for the United States to be disengaged. That would be a pretence, when, in every other respect, it's massively engaged in energy policies, markets, liberalization of the economies, etc. What the United States needs to do is to accept responsibility for its involvement.

HOLLIS: On the subject of Hamas, I don't think there is going to be any choice for either the United States or the Europeans but to engage with Islamic governments. If we look at the brewing confrontation between the United States and Iran, there is one recourse that has not yet been tried by the United States, and that is to actually talk directly to the Iranians. Without such a willingness, there is no possibility for the United States to retain influence or be a force for good in the region.

Brian, is part of grappling with this challenge of Islamic extremism being willing to talk to Hamas, being willing to talk to Iran?

KATULIS: A lot of people think that talking is a sign of weakness, but it could be viewed as a sign of strength. It's been an absolute disaster on the part of the Bush administration to refuse to talk to the Iranian regime, on the notion that it's less legitimate somehow than the North Korean regime, which is not elected.

Over the last five years, the Bush administration has appeased some of the worst elements of the Iranian regime and unwittingly has empowered them by not dealing with the regime directly, by

weapon and fundamentalism as a political ideology that might have its place?

SAYIGH: We speak of Islamic fundamentalism as if it's one thing. In fact, most fundamentalists in the Middle East are people who are simply, as it were, returning to the mosque, returning to beliefs in God, etc. and more actively pursuing social and religious beliefs, just as born-again Christians do in the United States. Most of them are not involved in activist politics or in militant politics, let alone in violence.

A huge problem in the United States is this tendency to simplify matters into one overarching ideological framework. We had the Cold War, and national liberation movements [around the world] were all seen as emanations of one single communist plot. Now we have something of the same sort where American academics, political analysts, media and lobbyists are gearing up to wage a new, overarching conflict with terrorism and political Islam.

The real overarching and overriding priority for U.S. policy toward places like Yemen, Egypt, Jordan or Palestine is not human rights, is not democracy. It's security, specifically combating terrorism. Yet who the terrorists are, what terrorism is, is not really well defined.

We need local communities in Egypt, in Jordan, in Iraq and elsewhere, to take part willingly and voluntarily in combating terrorist thinking and combating extremism. These are the real allies and this is where the United States really needs credibility and support. If all it does is resort to beefing up military and security agencies of governments of Egypt, Jordan or elsewhere, then I think

telligence above all else, as well as communication. It requires police work by local police forces, community support. That's the front line.

But beyond that is the need to develop policies that acknowledge other people's concerns and priorities even where the United States doesn't necessarily agree with others. This sets the backdrop within which local communities, local governments might be more willing to cooperate and to extend information where needed.

BEININ: I actually agree entirely with Yezid except that I would reverse the order. I would just say that for any of [the intelligence efforts] to have any chance to work, there has to be a radical revision of policy.

Rosemary, what do you think, especially since Europe has had a much longer experience with terrorism?

I'm slightly afraid that all this intelligence work—which I agree is where the focus has to be as opposed to on the use of military force—is leading to profiling and stereotyping and is re-igniting some social tensions in Europe in implementation. We've got to be careful about that. Also, we've got to be careful that the sharing of intelligence doesn't give particular advantage to governments that we might otherwise consider dictatorial in the Middle East.

Brian, this is great, but isn't this exactly what is then seen as being soft on terrorism?

KATULIS: I don't think so. There's a growing lack of confidence in President Bush's stewardship of national security and an argument to be made that he's lost control of our country's security and failed in his



In April, a U.S soldier stands guard near Baghdad's Buratha Shiite mosque.

fundamental duty to protect Americans. There is a way to frame it from a progressive angle, which isn't from a position of weakness, but one of strength.

We also need to update the way that we fight this battle of ideas. The one thing that a lot of people in America miss is that audiences in the Middle East are incredibly sophisticated and have grown even more sophisticated with the advance of regional media like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. The Bush administration's approach is to criticize these new media outlets and try to put the Arab media genie back into the bottle. My approach would be to engage these outlets and say, "There are a lot of things that the U.S. can be proud of and stand for, and we can be a force for good."

I think markets work, and free markets of information can help people obtain the information and ideas that they need to understand to advance their own interests.

If we were to build a roadmap for the Middle East and try and do things right, as so many of you have suggested, what kind of pragmatic goals might we set for ourselves?

KATULIS: In the Gulf region, we need to fundamentally rethink whether or not we need such an extensive military presence. It's insane to me that we don't have or have not supported some form of regional security cooperation between the actors in the region. Europe has NATO,

the western hemisphere has the OAS, and Africa the African Union.

We need to clearly set a time line for our troops to depart from Iraq. But in what other ways do we mitigate the risk of the eventual draw-down of our troop presence there? We need to start planting some seeds to help actors in the region do a little bit more for themselves to achieve that stability and progress.

HOLLIS: I would want policies that take the heat out of the extremist platform and demonstrate that there are other ways to achieve some of the social, economic and political good that clearly there's an appetite for in the region. One way to do that would be much more civil society contact.

The second thing I would be interested in is whether we could change our understanding of the issues for the region by promoting regional discussions, inclusive of security. Yes, a regional security structure would be terrific, but also a regional structure to address the environmental and ecological problems.

Lastly, I would want the walls that divide the states in terms of citizenship to be more flexible. In the European Union you can hold a passport in one place, you can have a house in another, and you can have a job in a third. Were [Palestinians] able to live in one place, do business in another, and have a Palestinian passport that meant something, then you wouldn't have to accommodate

all the Palestinians and therefore the solution in the West Bank and Gaza.

BEININ: I'd like to see several things that I think are doable. First, a real commitment to economic development. That means getting off the dogmatic horse of the Washington consensus, neoliberal International Monetary Fund approach to development.

Second, I think we can promote democracy without intervening in governments and trying to change regimes. There are lots of organizations in the Middle East—NGOs, human rights organizations—who would gladly be our partners if they perceived us to be serious about promoting democracy.

Finally, we have to move as quickly as we can towards extricating ourselves from Iraq and towards contributing massively to rebuilding the country. And we have to have a radical revision of our policy towards Palestine and Israel.

Yezid, you get the last word.

SAYIGH: In that case, we've heard all the possible wishes and I just wish we could all believe that any of them would come true. I'm just going to add a couple of predictions.

One has to do with Iraq and Iran. I really don't see that the United States has any happy options in Iraq. The situation is almost beyond repair. Unless the United States somehow makes an implicit deal with Iran, it's probable that there's not going to be any modicum of stability in Iraq that would allow the United States to pull out without leaving a total mess behind—a mess that would totally and fundamentally discredit and undermine any future prospect for effective U.S. intervention of any type in the region. That's one concern.

The second is that when it comes to Israel and Palestine, the current U.S. policy is not going to change in time. I think we are heading toward a real mess in Palestine if Hamas is totally isolated and brought down. This will break the Palestinian government, break the political system, break the local economy, all which are extremely fragile. And we will be left with a humanitarian crisis on our hands, ironically engineered by U.S. and western policies. By the end of the Bush presidency, we will not have the Palestinian state we were promised several times. We will not have a peace deal.

This is, I think, is what the United States will be left with. ■

Why Exiting Iraq Won't Be Easy

Iraqis may hate the occupation, but they fear U.S. withdrawal

BY CHRIS TOENSING

WHEN 300,000 PROTESTERS ASSEMBLED in New York City in late April urging President George W. Bush to “bring all the troops home now,” the response from the Bush administration was familiar: silence.

Despite polls showing that majorities of Americans now believe the war was a mistake, Washington has no plans for ending the occupation of Iraq, either now or any time in the near future. Not one of the retired generals who came forth in mid-April to blast Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's mishandling of the war is calling for a pullout. And top Democrats, such as Senators John Kerry and Ted Kennedy, who are demanding a timetable, are still lonely voices in their own party.

While critics of the occupation focus their ire on Washington, there is similar paralysis at the top in Baghdad, despite widespread popular anger at the U.S. presence. Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, the Iraqi national security adviser tied to the Shiite Dawa Party, is willing to talk about a “condition-based” withdrawal of some U.S. troops, but views a substantial U.S. military presence as the country's “insurance policy.” His Sunni Arab counterparts in government agree. “Any withdrawal of the American forces now will lead the country into a civil war,” says Tariq al-Hashimi, the leader of the Iraqi Islamist Party tapped to be a vice president in Iraq's new “national unity” government.

In fact, the country is already in the throes of a civil war. “What we have going on in Iraq is a low-level civil war,” says Patrick Lang, former chief of Middle East intelligence at the Defense Intelligence Agency, “with the Iranians standing in the background, smiling.” Each day in Iraq brings fresh news of sectarian violence. Car bombs target police stations, mosques and markets in heavily Shiite Arab neighborhoods of the capital. In Baghdad and other cities, dozens of men are turning up dead in drainage ditches and garbage dumps, their hands bound, most of them shot execution-style in the



On April 3, Iraqi men and U.S. soldiers gather at the site of a car bomb explosion in Sadr City, on the outskirts of Baghdad.

back of the head.

This conflict has been underway since at least early 2005, but it ratcheted up after the February 22 bombing of the Askariyya shrine in Samarra. In early May, using morgue records, the *Los Angeles Times* documented at least 3,800 violent deaths in Baghdad alone during the first three months of 2006, many of them execution-style slayings. That means that civil strife in Iraq is bloodier in absolute

terms than that which devastated Lebanon from 1975 to 1990.

In the face of Iraq's slow-motion implosion, the White House insists on staying the course. The Bush administration is still betting that, in time, the United States can “draw down” thousands of soldiers, though perhaps not from a few permanent bases, in consultation with a stable, U.S.-friendly Iraqi government. But it is increasingly apparent that the



**Shiite cleric
Moqtada al-
Sadr wants U.S.
soldiers out now.**

SAAD SERHAN/GETTY IMAGES

accelerating civil war, as well as political and budgetary realities in Washington, will dictate otherwise. The United States, having done so much to break Iraq, has now become powerless to fix it.

THE AIM OF the roughly 20,000 Sunni Arab insurgents has always been to drive out the U.S. military, but now (and even more so) it is to cripple the Shiite-dominated government brought to power by U.S.-sponsored elections. On the other side of the civil war, elements of the security forces loyal to the Shiite parties, as well as militias such as the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army, exact revenge for both the bombings and the depredations of Saddam

Hussein's regime. Each side has killed civilians simply because of their religious affiliation, leading some Iraqi truckers to carry two driver's licenses, one with a Sunni-sounding name for the Sunni areas and one with a Shiite-sounding name for the Shiite areas.

To be sure, the current conflict is historically rooted in the deposed regime's repression. "We unscrewed the lid on the jar," Lang reckons. But the extent of the mayhem was not inevitable.

"To a large extent the chaos is of U.S. making," says Iraqi scholar Isam al-Khafaji, who quit in disgust after serving two months in 2003 with the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council, a group of returned expatriates who advised the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). In the summer of 2003, the CPA dissolved the heavily Sunni Arab officer corps of the Iraqi army, just as the U.S. military was beginning the first of its indiscriminate sweeps in the "Sunni triangle." Together with the vengeful "debaathification" policies pushed by Ahmad Chalabi and other former exiles, these policies convinced Sunni Arabs that they would be treated as the enemy in post-Saddam Iraq.

The CPA made its most damaging decision in July, when it allocated seats in the Iraqi Governing Council to Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Christians according to estimates

of their share of the population. For the first time, sectarian and ethnic affiliation became the formal organizing principle of Iraqi politics, exacerbating the tendency of Iraqi factions to pursue maximum benefits for their own community at the expense of Iraq as a nation. Sectarian and ethnic divisions deepened and widened with each "milestone" in the U.S.-sponsored transition to electoral democracy.

THROUGH IDEOLOGICAL RIGIDITY and incompetence, therefore, the United States has midwived both an anti-occupation guerrilla war and an unconventional civil war over control of the country and its petroleum resources after the United States departs. The two wars are tightly intertwined.

On the one hand, the U.S. occupation remains a key reason behind Sunni Arab anger with the post-Saddam order—and not just among the armed insurgents. Many Sunni Arabs oppose the Iraqi government and tacitly back the insurgency, simply because the government has "collaborated" with the United States. But the insurgency and political opposition increasingly have an anti-Shiite sectarian overtone. Some guerrillas may lay down their arms if the United States withdraws, but many will fight on.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi security forces—whose "standing up" Bush always cites as the prerequisite for U.S. soldiers "standing down"—are themselves combatants in the civil conflict. Nouri al-Maliki, the new prime minister-designate, has promised to merge the Shiite and Kurdish militias with the nascent Iraqi army, saying that "arms should be in the hands of the government." But this move would ensure that the supposedly national army is composed of soldiers whose primary loyalties lie with their religious or ethnic leaders.

Wayne White, the principal Iraq analyst for the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research between 2003 and 2005, says "reliable sources" tell him that "most all Iraqi army battalions at various stages of advanced readiness are overwhelmingly Shia or Kurdish." One of his U.S. government sources believes, as White relates, that the U.S. has in essence "trained one side of a potential civil war."

The Shiite religious parties, in particular, prefer that the U.S. military stay until they consolidate their grip on the

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security apparatus. But even independent Iraqis, like Isam al-Khafaji, fear the intensified sectarian violence and the multi-sided mêlée of militias that might follow a U.S. pullout.

Al-Khafaji goes so far as to aver: "No serious Iraqi—whether Sunni, Shiite or Kurd—really wants a U.S. withdrawal." He notes that the only major Shiite lead-

using rail freight or large road convoys, meaning that the enormous planes built for transcontinental flights are used for in-country travel. But there are simply not enough planes to effect a precipitous pullout. A number of units would be forced to leave the country in land convoys, which could be attacked by either insurgents seeking to press their point

ing U.S. forces to leave. The United States could threaten to stop training the new Iraqi army or withhold aid money if the militias were not reined in and a timetable not drawn up. In this scenario, the Shiite religious parties—out of fear of losing everything they have gained since the fall of Saddam—might also relinquish the security apparatus and negotiate in good

The one partial blessing the United States can bestow on Iraq is to remove itself from the equation, and chances are it will have to do so unilaterally.

er to demand an immediate end to the occupation is populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The cleric commands the allegiance of the ragtag Mahdi Army, which is suspected of involvement in political assassinations and has proudly enforced the law of the gun, torching liquor stores and imposing "Islamic" dress on women, in southern cities like Basra and Nasiriyya, as well as in parts of the capital. Al-Khafaji says Sadr's anti-occupation stance should be decoded as follows: "Yes, please leave and give our militias freedom of maneuver!"

Yet the United States seems to be doing very little to stop the civil war that its continued presence is supposed to prevent. The military failed to intervene in the street fighting that followed the Askariyya shrine bombing, for example. Indeed, the military's predicament is that it cannot intervene, because then it would appear to be taking sides more than the United States has done already.

WHEN WASHINGTON REALIZES it can no longer stay the course, what will withdrawal look like? Barring complete disaster, it will not resemble the headlong flight conjured by the phrase "cutting and running." As Jeffrey White, former chief of Middle East military assessments for the Defense Intelligence Agency, puts it: "We want to get out, but not like we got out of Beirut or Saigon."

From the Pentagon's perspective, a helter-skelter withdrawal is the option of last resort. According to Wayne White, for the past two years, security concerns have impelled the military to airlift both troops and heavy equipment instead of

or, White suggests, "some very angry people who thought you were going to stay." While such fighting would be brief, heavy U.S. casualties would be possible. "Phased is the way to go," White says. "Abrupt is not."

Since the logistics dictate a phased operation anyway, the cognoscenti have been sketching exit strategies in which the U.S. departure would also help Iraq's internal divisions to heal. The impulse is admirable, but it may be too late.

In a *Financial Times* op-ed, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, proposed that "Washington should quietly ask Iraqi leaders to publicly ask the U.S. to leave" and then consult with those leaders on a timetable. Brzezinski believes that many Iraqi politicians would welcome the opportunity to pose to the Iraqi people as self-liberators, and two years ago, before the civil war began, he might have been right.

He also glibly dismisses those who do "not wish to ask the U.S. to leave. They are the ones who would leave when we leave, which says something about the depth of their domestic support." But at the moment, this category encompasses not just the feckless Chalabi, but also the Shiite religious parties, who won a near majority in the National Assembly in the December 2005 elections, the twin Kurdish parties, and a significant number of Sunni Arabs who U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad "brought back in" to formal politics. There is unlikely to be a unified Iraqi government that would want the United States to leave.

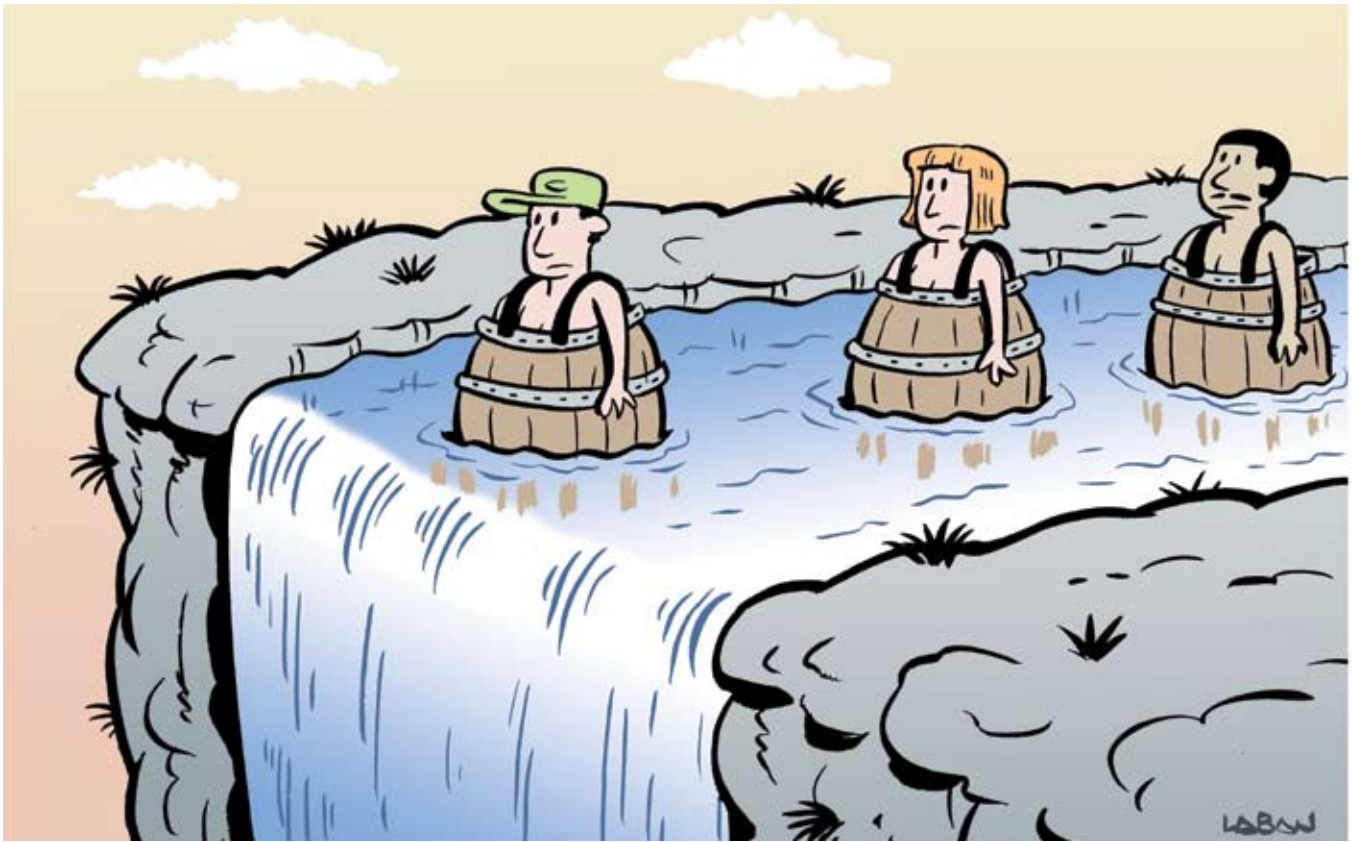
That could lead to the through-the-looking-glass scenario, with Washington bullying the Iraqi government into ask-

ing U.S. forces to leave. The United States could threaten to stop training the new Iraqi army or withhold aid money if the militias were not reined in and a timetable not drawn up. In this scenario, the Shiite religious parties—out of fear of losing everything they have gained since the fall of Saddam—might also relinquish the security apparatus and negotiate in good

faith with Sunni Arabs and secular nationalists over revisions to the constitution passed in October 2005. The Kurds, fearing Turkish intervention if they did not curtail their ambitions, might abandon their quest to add oil-rich Kirkuk to their northern autonomous zone. Realities, again, are harder. Sectarian strife has redoubled every group's determination to possess both a hand in "national" security forces and their own stockpile of arms. The Shiite parties are divided internally over the federalism provisions of the constitution, and their own negotiations could take the form of militia activity. The Kurds have been settling the environs of Kirkuk, and they do not plan to leave. They can assuage Turkey's concerns by kicking out the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters who are now using northern Iraq as a base for a low-grade insurgency in heavily Kurdish southeastern Turkey. It is outside the scope of U.S. power to tame all the furies unleashed by the invasion.

The U.S. occupation may no longer be the biggest cause of violence in Iraq, but it is still one of the causes, and it cannot be the cure. The one partial blessing the United States can bestow on Iraq is to remove itself from the equation, and chances are it will have to do so unilaterally. No one should pretend, however, that this would be a noble course of action or a panacea for Iraq's ills. It would only be a very bad decision necessitated by the even worse decisions that were made before. ■

CHRIS TOENSING is editor of *Middle East Report*, published by the Middle East Research and Information Project in Washington, DC.



Bankruptcy Law in Shambles

What happens when the credit card industry writes congressional legislation? According to the judges who have to enforce it, anarchy

BY BRIAN J. ROGAL

IN DECEMBER, ALFONSO SOSA, a house painter in Fredericksburg, Texas, fell behind on the payments for the mobile home he shared with his wife Melba. The mortgage holder moved to foreclose, and Sosa filed an emergency petition in federal court for bankruptcy protection. But the Sosa family quickly ran afoul of the country's new bankruptcy law, which had gone into effect only six weeks before. One of the many new provisions requires all debtors to take a simple, one-hour credit counseling class before they file, but the Sosas had not known about the requirement.

Although Sosa had taken the class by the time they got back to court, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Frank R. Monroe quickly dismissed their case, leaving the Sosa trailer open to foreclosure.

Monroe was furious, not with the

Sosas, but with Congress for tying his hands. "Can any rational human being make a cogent argument that this makes any sense at all?" he wrote in his opinion. He even accused Congress of colluding with the nation's credit industry "to make more money off the backs of consumers in this country."

"It was very surprising that he came out swinging in that opinion," says David Aaron Soto, a bankruptcy attorney in Corpus Christi, Texas, who occasionally practices in Monroe's court. Soto says Monroe is known as a calm, careful judge who writes moderate opinions. "My frustrations and anxieties don't matter much," Soto says. "But Congress and the country should be paying attention to the judges."

Monroe is not alone. Across the country, federal bankruptcy judges have begun to express frustration with the

Bankruptcy and Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005.

"No judge is comfortable doing something they know is unjust," says U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Leif M. Clark, of San Antonio, Texas. However, judges all over the country have had to dismiss cases similar to the Sosas, he says. "I haven't taken a survey," he adds, but the critical reaction from bankruptcy judges crosses political boundaries. "I've gotten feedback from a wide variety and everyone says it's badly done."

"Unquestionably, this is the most poorly written piece of legislation that I or anyone else has ever seen," says U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Keith M. Lundin, who has overseen cases in Tennessee since 1977. "No one has ever seen a piece of garbage like this," he adds. "There's going to be the most fantastic anarchy in bankruptcy courts for years."

MANY OPPONENTS of the new law hope that judicial frustration over how to interpret its hundreds of sections will help fuel a backlash, and allow a future Congress to knock out provisions, such as the credit counseling, that have made filing for bankruptcy more onerous.

Others are skeptical.

"There is a need to do it," says a House Democratic staff member, "but a strong inertia comes into play when you have a bill this contentious and complex." After struggling over the bill for about eight years, with the financial services industry spending millions in lobbying fees, members of Congress are experiencing bankruptcy exhaustion, the staff member says. In addition, "there is nothing the courts are saying now that the Congress did not hear in committee."

The law was the most comprehensive overhaul of the nation's bankruptcy law since the late '70s. "That [overhaul] was analyzed line by line on a bipartisan basis," says Kenneth N. Klee, a law professor at the University of California-Los Angeles and head of the National Bankruptcy Conference, an elite group of about 60 experts that has advised Congress for decades. "This time, and I say this as a Republican, [Congress] paid a lot more heed to the credit industry and other moneyed interests," Klee says. "They ran it by the people who paid \$100 million in lobbying fees to get this through."

Klee says that only about five people, including Todd J. Zywicki, a law professor at George Mason University in Virginia, and several lobbyists, wrote the legislation. A group that small can't coherently revamp something as intricate as the bankruptcy code, Klee says. Neither Zywicki, nor the office of Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), the bill's chief sponsor in the House, returned calls seeking comment.

Hundreds of law professors and judges tried to weigh in, testifying before Congress and signing letters denouncing the proposed reforms. But they were no match for the coalition of credit card companies, auto lenders and home mortgage providers who claimed that many Americans who filed for bankruptcy—a record two million families in 2005—were abusing the system. The law easily passed both chambers last April.

Most experts say that since so few people are filing under the new law, evaluat-

ing the effect of the changes will be difficult for at least a year or two. According to Lundquist Consulting Inc., a giant rush of about 500,000 debtors filed for bankruptcy in the week before the new law became effective last October, but less than 30,000 filed in the next month.

However, some numbers have come to light, and the law's opponents are having a tough time not saying, "We told you so."

"Unquestionably, this is the most poorly written piece of legislation that I or anyone else has ever seen," says U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Keith M. Lundin, who has overseen cases since 1977.

Throughout the legislative battle, creditors claimed that hundreds of thousands of debtors were filing for Chapter 7 bankruptcies every year—which offers them a fresh start by clearing most debts—even though they could afford a Chapter 13 bankruptcy, which requires debtors to work out a payment plan with their creditors. To help curtail the alleged abuse, families who earn more than their state's median income are subject to a complicated "means test" designed to force many into Chapter 13 repayment plans.

But in February, the National Association of Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys published a survey called "Bankruptcy Reform's Impact: Where Are All The Deadbeats?" The association asked 10 leading credit-counseling agencies to provide data on the debtors they had begun seeing in October, and received a complete response from six. They found that less than five percent of their 60,000 debtors had sufficient funds to pay off their debt even under a Chapter 13. Nearly 80 percent had been driven to bankruptcy by medical illness, divorce, the loss of a job, or another force beyond their control.

ALTHOUGH THE PROSPECTS for revisiting the bankruptcy code are not bright, some experts believe congressional inertia might be overcome if some of the biggest supporters of the 2005 reform conclude it's not creating a financial windfall. For example, Jack Ayer, resident scholar at the nonpartisan American Bankruptcy Institute, says, "When everything settles down the cred-

it card companies will be losing money on it."

"It's such a poorly thought out piece of legislation," says Henry E. Hildebrand, a U.S. bankruptcy trustee in Nashville, Tennessee. He currently administers about 14,000 bankruptcies, deciding when and how much debtors need to pay their creditors. "They put too many loopholes in there," he says. Under the

old law, Hildebrand says he could force higher-income debtors filing Chapter 13 bankruptcy to give up a vacation home or car. Now, however, he says a debtor can claim that money used for car payments, even for a new Mercedes, can't be redirected to pay off other debts. Hildebrand claims these new rules were inserted at the behest of auto and home lenders, who wanted to ensure they got paid before the credit card issuers. "The new law is good if you've got a lot of toys," he adds.

For now, the Sosas and their three young children have hung onto their mobile home. They filed their bankruptcy case again, this time with the help of James Chapman, a bankruptcy attorney in Fredericksburg. The Sosas hope the house-painting business picks up and they can forge an agreement in court to hold onto their house and continue making payments. Chapman, however, says that the new law has "made everything more difficult and more expensive."

Chapman and other bankruptcy lawyers say they now have to collect their clients' tax returns, several months' worth of pay stubs and other documents just to get them through the means test, and therefore, have to charge higher fees. The Sosas have had to pay him an extra \$1,000 to handle the case, Chapman estimates—money that could have helped pay down the family's debt.

The new law, he concludes, "has made life a lot more difficult for people in America who are having hard times." ■

BRIAN J. ROGAL is a Chicago-based freelance writer.



The UAW union hall in Sandusky, Ohio. Six of the 10 Delphi plants set for closure or sale are in Ohio.

Delphi Dodges Union Contracts

Bankruptcy is the newest tool in the corporate battle against workers

BY DAVID MOBERG

THE DELPHI CORPORATION AUTO parts plant where Brian Stover works bears little resemblance to the industry's iconic assembly lines. One of the largest integrated circuit plants in the country, the quiet, microscopically clean complex of high-tech fabrication machines in Kokomo, Indiana produces critical components for today's electronically sophisticated vehicles. That gives Stover, a skilled maintenance worker, a rare measure of job security in a rapidly changing industry.

But Delphi is also at the cutting edge of menacing change for auto workers. Last October, the company—the parts division of General Motors until it was spun off in 1999—declared bankruptcy and proposed cutting workers' jobs and wages by roughly two-thirds. Despite efforts to draw GM into deals that would at least cushion the blow for current Delphi workers, in late March Delphi asked the bankruptcy court to void union contracts and impose slightly less draconian cuts. And in a move that could shut down GM as well, unions

for 34,000 domestic Delphi employees, primarily the United Auto Workers and the Communications Workers, are threatening to strike in June.

Delphi's assault on its workers through bankruptcy proceedings may prove a defining moment for the industry. Broadly integrated giants once dominated the industry, steadily increasing productivity, but also—after unionization in the '30s—sharing some of that growth with workers. Now the industry has become more fragmented, competitive and global, and companies with no—or weak—unions set the patterns.

Globalization has reshaped the auto industry in ways that contributed to the Delphi crisis. Companies have moved operations out of the country: Only 33 of Delphi's 160 plants are now in the United States, and the company now plans to eliminate all but eight of those remaining. Since 2000, even as vehicle sales have remained stable, auto parts employment in the United States has dropped by more than one-sixth, mainly from offshoring.

And the trend continues: General Motors and Chrysler both recently announced expansions in China.

Globalization cuts both ways

Six years ago, 840,000 workers made auto parts in the United States; today, there are only about 660,000. But as Sean McAlinden of the Center for Automotive Research argues, the industry is likely to stabilize at 400,000 to 500,000 jobs because it makes sense to produce many parts domestically, close to final assembly and consumer markets. However that doesn't mean those jobs will continue to provide a comfortable living for auto workers.

While U.S. companies have been moving overseas, foreign automakers have also been increasing their investment in the United States, and sales of their American-made products have been increasing even faster than those of imports. As foreign-owned final assembly plants opened in the United States, foreign-based parts suppliers also expanded here.

The United Auto Workers once hoped

foreign manufacturers would make such investments, but it didn't work out as they intended: Most foreign-owned plants are non-union and located in the South. American auto companies have also turned increasingly to other domestic parts makers, both non-union companies and unionized plants with low wages. "What caught Delphi is the wage structure, not in China, but down the street" in other parts plants, says David Cole, chairman of the Center for Automotive Research.

As the union share of the auto industry shrank, from roughly 60 percent of the workforce in the early '80s to about 30 percent now (even less for parts workers), Chrysler, Ford and then GM spun off their parts divisions. They hoped to reduce their own parts costs by pitting suppliers against each other and ultimately undermining the union contracts. As GM's spinoff Delphi ran into problems last year when GM sales slumped (without sufficient diversification in Delphi's customer base to compensate), raw material prices jumped and GM's demands for price cuts escalated sharply.

Delphi blamed its problems on the higher wages, benefits, job protections and legacy costs, especially for retiree healthcare, that it inherited from GM. It does pay more than most competitors—about \$27 an hour (total compensation costs of \$45 an hour or more) compared to around \$15 to \$18 an hour (total cost of \$28). Now Delphi wants to cut wages to \$22 an hour, then to \$16.50 next year.

Delphi does have a competitive wage disadvantage. But with more than \$3 billion in cash and credit on hand, it was not really bankrupt. Arguably, Delphi's problem stemmed from GM's failure to design cars that could command its historic premium in the marketplace. Its cars even sold poorly with huge consumer rebates. Also, at least eight other lower-wage auto parts companies have declared bankruptcy in the past couple of years, suggesting deeper industry problems, like over-capacity and an unrealistic price squeeze from companies like GM.

Now, according to Stover, who holds a master's degree in management and barely lost the last election as shop chairman of his UAW local, Delphi managers are trying "to break unions and reduce labor costs instead of managing the business and looking internally at what they're doing wrong." They're attacking employees,

rather than working with them to solve problems. "It's like the old adage," Stover says. "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Delphi angered workers like Stover by declaring bankruptcy only on domestic operations, shielding its huge and profitable overseas investments. But "where did that money come from?" Stover asks.

The labor movement needs to use the Delphi crisis over retiree healthcare costs to rally support for a single-payer national health insurance plan that would benefit all workers.

"Out of U.S. operations." Even among its U.S. factories, only a few were big money-losers, and most—like the Kokomo plant—were profitable.

And what about those "legacy costs" for healthcare and pensions? Stover says that, starting in 1984, the union agreed to concessions and cost containment clauses in every contract to pay for those commitments to workers. "Where's that money now?" he asks. "[It's] in China, Korea and other countries, making everyone else look profitable. What happened to the money and benefits I've been giving up every year?"

Nationwide consequences

In bankruptcy court, the UAW is arguing that Delphi is violating bankruptcy law, by putting corporate problems primarily on the backs of workers, as well as acting prematurely, since Delphi doesn't know how much it may save from an agreement negotiated with GM for buy-outs and transfers of Delphi workers to jobs at GM.

Rank-and-file autoworkers have been organizing through a new network, Soldiers of Solidarity, to conduct "work-to-rule" slowdowns to fight any concessions. Both the UAW and Delphi are also pressing GM to accept more financial responsibilities. But governments should be involved in a grand public strategy to keep auto production viable in the United States, as well as to maintain high wages for the entire industry.

The labor movement needs to use the Delphi crisis over retiree healthcare costs to rally support for a single-payer national health insurance plan that would benefit all workers. The UAW and some

Democrats are proposing that the federal government cover some health care costs in exchange for the companies meeting goals on energy efficiency and new engine technologies.

Also, bankruptcy law should be reformed to make it tougher for companies to break union contracts. Ideally, global companies should not be allowed to

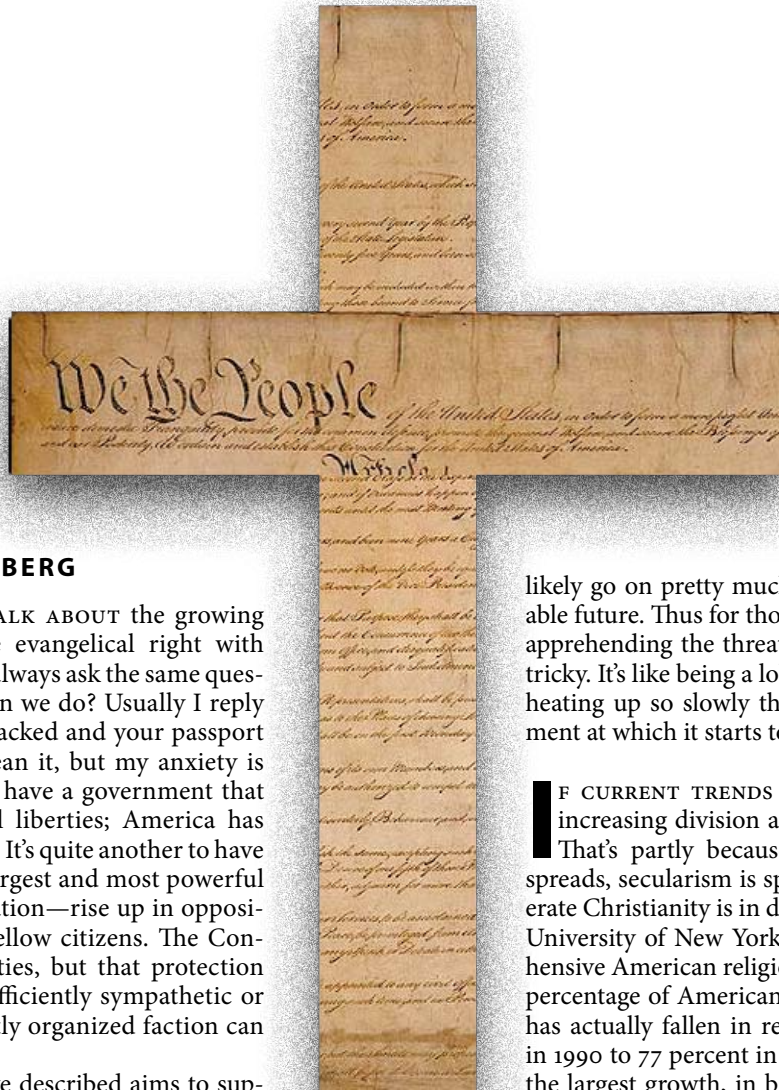
declare bankruptcy simply on their domestic assets, but, at the least, Congress should require bankruptcy courts to take into account global operations, as Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) have proposed.

Expanded public financial support from all levels of government should be used as an incentive to push companies more aggressively to upgrade their manufacturing processes and implement new energy-efficiency and safety technologies. But, in exchange, the public should get a stake in the ownership of the companies, an agreement on promises for domestic production, and protection of both workers' right to organize and standards of living.

The labor movement has recruited close to a majority of members of Congress in support of legislation to strengthen workers' right to organize, particularly through verification of majority support shown by signed union cards. That would help the UAW overcome stiff employer resistance, but the union has the resources to organize far more vigorously than it has and needs to do so as part of a broader movement for workers' rights here and abroad. Indeed, the Delphi crisis raises "the larger question of how to rethink the labor movement and the issues that can be put on the agenda, like healthcare and reducing work time," argues York University professor and former Canadian Auto Workers research director Sam Gindin.

The repercussions extend far beyond Kokomo. "If Delphi can get the contract rejected through a false bankruptcy, tell me one corporation in the United States with a union contract that won't do that," Stover says. "It's not just a Delphi issue. It's a national issue." ■

Saving Secular Society



BY MICHELLE GOLDBERG

WHenever I talk about the growing power of the evangelical right with friends, they always ask the same question: What can we do? Usually I reply with a joke: Keep a bag packed and your passport current. I don't really mean it, but my anxiety is genuine. It's one thing to have a government that shows contempt for civil liberties; America has survived such men before. It's quite another to have a mass movement—the largest and most powerful mass movement in the nation—rise up in opposition to the rights of its fellow citizens. The Constitution protects minorities, but that protection is not absolute; with a sufficiently sympathetic or apathetic majority, a tightly organized faction can get around it.

The mass movement I've described aims to supplant Enlightenment rationalism with what it calls the "Christian worldview." The phrase is based on the conviction that true Christianity must govern every aspect of public and private life, and that all—government, science, history and culture—must be understood according to the dictates of scripture. There are biblically correct positions on every issue, from gay marriage to income tax rates, and only those with the right worldview can discern them. This is Christianity as a total ideology—I call it Christian nationalism. It's an ideology adhered to by millions of Americans, some of whom are very powerful. It's what drives a great many of the fights over religion, science, sex and pluralism now dividing communities all over the country.

I am not suggesting that religious tyranny is imminent in the United States. Our democracy is eroding and some of our rights are disappearing, but for most people, including those most opposed to the Christian nationalist agenda, life will most

likely go on pretty much as normal for the foreseeable future. Thus for those who value secular society, apprehending the threat of Christian nationalism is tricky. It's like being a lobster in a pot, with the water heating up so slowly that you don't notice the moment at which it starts to kill you.

IF CURRENT TRENDS continue, we will see ever-increasing division and acrimony in our politics. That's partly because, as Christian nationalism spreads, secularism is spreading as well, while moderate Christianity is in decline. According to the City University of New York Graduate Center's comprehensive American religious identification survey, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christians has actually fallen in recent years, from 86 percent in 1990 to 77 percent in 2001. The survey found that the largest growth, in both absolute and percentage terms, was among those who don't subscribe to any religion. Their numbers more than doubled, from 14.3 million in 1990, when they constituted 8 percent of the population, to 29.4 million in 2001, when they made up 14 percent. "The top three 'gainers' in America's vast religious marketplace appear to be Evangelical Christians, those describing themselves as Non-Denominational Christians and those who profess no religion," the survey found. (The percentage of other religious minorities remained small, totaling less than 4 percent of the population).

This is a recipe for polarization. As Christian nationalism becomes more militant, secularists and religious minorities will mobilize in opposition, ratcheting up the hostility. Thus we're likely to see a shrinking middle ground, with both camps increasingly viewing each other across a chasm of mutual incomprehension and contempt.

In the coming years, we will probably see the curtailment of

the civil rights that gay people, women and religious minorities have won in the last few decades. With two Bush appointees on the Supreme Court, abortion rights will be narrowed; if the president gets a third, it could mean the end of *Roe v. Wade*. Expect increasing drives to ban gay people from being adoptive or foster parents, as well as attempts to fire gay schoolteachers. Evangelical leaders are encouraging their flocks to be alert to signs of homosexuality in their kids, which will lead to a growing number of gay teenagers forced into “reparative therapy” designed to turn them straight. (Focus on the Family urges parents to consider seeking help for boys as young as five if they show a “tendency to cry easily, be less athletic, and dislike the roughhousing that other boys enjoy.”)

Christian nationalist symbolism and ideology will increasingly pervade public life. In addition to the war on evolution, there will be campaigns to teach Christian nationalist history in public schools. An elective course developed by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, a right-wing evangelical group, is already being offered by more than 300 school districts in 36 states. The influence of Christian nationalism in public schools, colleges, courts, social services and doctors’ offices will deform American life, rendering it ever more pinched, mean, and divided.

There’s still a long way, though, between this damaged version of democracy and real theocracy. Tremendous crises would have to shred what’s left of the American consensus before religious fascism becomes a possibility. That means that secularists and liberals shouldn’t get hysterical, but they also shouldn’t be complacent.

Christian nationalism is still constrained by the Constitution, the courts, and by a passionate democratic (and occasionally Democratic) opposition. It’s also limited by capitalism. Many corporations are happy to see their political allies harness the rage and passion of the Christian right’s foot soldiers, but the culture industry is averse to government censorship. Nor is homophobia good for business, since many companies need to both recruit qualified gay employees and market to gay customers. Biotech firms are not going to want to hire graduates without a thorough understanding of

evolution, so economic pressure will militate against creationism’s invading a critical mass of the public schools.

IT WOULD TAKE a national disaster, or several of them, for all these bulwarks to crumble and for Christian nationalists to truly “take the land,” as Michael Farris, president of the evangeli-

The influence of Christian nationalism in public schools, courts, social services and doctors’ offices will deform American life, rendering it ever more pinched, mean and divided.

cal Patrick Henry College, put it. Historically, totalitarian movements have been able to seize state power only when existing authorities prove unable to deal with catastrophic challenges—economic meltdown, security failures, military defeat—and people lose their faith in the legitimacy of the system.

Such calamities are certainly conceivable in America—Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath offered a terrifying glimpse of how quickly order can collapse. If terrorists successfully strike again, we’d probably see significant curtailment of liberal dissenters’ free speech rights, coupled with mounting right-wing belligerence, both religious and secular.

The breakdown in the system could also be subtler. Many experts have warned that America’s debt is unsustainable and that economic crisis could be on the horizon. If there is a hard landing—due to an oil shock, a burst housing bubble, a sharp decline in the value of the dollar, or some other crisis—interest rates would shoot up, leaving many people unable to pay their floating-rate mortgages and credit card bills. Repossessions and bankruptcies would follow. The resulting anger could fuel radical populist movements of either the left or the right—more likely the right, since it has a far stronger ideological infrastructure in place in most of America.

Military disaster may also exacerbate such disaffection. America’s war in Iraq seems nearly certain to come to an ignominious end. The real victims of failure there will be Iraqi, but many Americans will feel embittered, humiliated and sympathetic to the stab-in-the-back

rhetoric peddled by the right to explain how Bush’s venture has gone so horribly wrong. It was the defeat in World War I, after all, that created the conditions for fascism to grow in Germany.

Perhaps America will be lucky, however, and muddle through its looming problems. In that case, Christian nationalism will continue to be a powerful and

growing influence in American politics, although its expansion will happen more fitfully and gradually.

The country’s demographics are on the movement’s side. Megachurch culture is spreading. The exurbs where religious conservatism thrives are the fastest growing parts of America; in 2004, 97 of the country’s 100 fastest-growing counties voted Republican. The disconnection of the exurbs is a large part of what makes the spread of Christian nationalism’s fictitious reality possible, because there is very little to conflict with it.

A movement that constitutes its members’ entire social world has a grip that’s hard to break. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt put it this way: “Social atomization and extreme individualization preceded the mass movements which, much more easily and earlier than they did the sociable, non-individualistic members of the traditional parties, attracted the completely unorganized, the typical ‘nonjoiners’ who for individualistic reasons always had refused to recognize social links or obligations.”

THOSE WHO WANT to fight Christian nationalism will need a long-term and multifaceted strategy. I see it as having three parts—electoral reform to give urban areas fair representation in the federal government, grassroots organizing to help people fight Christian

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A parishioner sings a song of worship in the 7,000-seat Willow Creek Community Church during a Sunday service in South Barrington, Ill.

REUTERS/JOHN GRESS

nationalism on the ground and a media campaign to raise public awareness about the movement's real agenda.

My ideas are not about reconciliation or healing. It would be good if a leader stepped forward who could recognize the grievances of both sides, broker some sort of truce, and mend America's ragged divides. The anxieties that underlay Christian nationalism's appeal—fears about social breakdown, marital instability and cultural decline—are real. They should be acknowledged and, whenever possible, addressed. But as long as the movement aims at the destruction of secular society and the political enforcement of its theology, it has to be battled, not comforted and appeased.

And while I support liberal struggles for economic justice—higher wages, uni-

versal health care, affordable education, and retirement security—I don't think economic populism will do much to neutralize the religious right. Cultural interests are real interests, and many drives are stronger than material ones. As Arendt pointed out, totalitarian movements have always confounded observers who try to analyze them in terms of class.

Ultimately, a fight against Christian nationalist rule has to be a fight against the anti-urban bias built into the structure of our democracy. Because each state has two senators, the 7 percent of the population that live in the 17 least-populous states control more than a third of Congress's upper house. Conservative states are also overrepresented in the Electoral College. According to Steven Hill of the Center for Voting and Democracy, the combined populations of Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, North and South Dakota, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Alaska equal that of New York and Massachusetts, but the former states have a total of nine more votes in the Electoral College (as well as over five times the votes in the Senate). In America, conservatives literally count for more.

Liberals should work to abolish the Electoral College and to even out the composition of the Senate, perhaps by splitting some of the country's larger states. (A campaign for statehood for New York City might be a place to start.) It will be a grueling, Herculean job. With conservatives already indulging in fantasies of victimization at the hands of a maniacal Northeastern elite, it will take a mon-

umental movement to wrest power away from them. Such a movement will come into being only when enough people in the blue states stop internalizing right-wing jeers about how out of touch they are with "real Americans" and start getting angry at being ruled by reactionaries who are out of touch with them.

After all, the heartland has no claim to moral authority. The states whose voters are most obsessed with "moral values" have the highest divorce and teen pregnancy rates. The country's highest murder rates are in the South and the lowest are in New England. The five states with the best-ranked public schools in the country—Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New Jersey and Wisconsin—are all progressive redoubts. The five states with the worst—New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, Mississippi and Louisiana—all went for Bush.

The canard that the culture wars are a fight between "elites" versus "regular Americans" belies a profound split between different kinds of ordinary Americans, all feeling threatened by the others' baffling and alien values. Ironically, however, by buying into right-wing elite-baiting, liberals start thinking like out-of-touch elites. Rather than reflecting on what kind of policies would make their own lives better, what kind of country they want to live in, and who they want to represent them—and then figuring out how to win others to their vision—progressives flail about for ideas and symbols that they hope will appeal to some imaginary heartland rube. That is condescending.

ONE WAY FOR progressives to build a movement and fight Christian nationalism at the same time is to focus on local politics. For guidance, they need only look to the Christian Coalition: It wasn't until after Bill Clinton's election exiled the evangelical right from power in Washington that the Christian Coalition really developed its nationwide electoral apparatus.

The Christian right developed a talent for crafting state laws and amendments to serve as wedge issues, rallying their base, and forcing the other side to defend seemingly extreme positions. Campaigns to require parental consent for minors' abortions, for example, get overwhelming public support and put the pro-choice movement on the defensive while giving pro-lifers valuable political experience.

MICHELLE GOLDBERG

**Reading and
Booksigning for**

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Liberals can use this strategy too. They can find issues to exploit the other side's radicalism, winning a few political victories and, just as important, marginalizing Christian nationalists in the eyes of their fellow citizens.

Progressives could work to pass local and state laws, by ballot initiative wherever possible, denying public funds to any organization that discriminates on the basis of religion. Because so much faith-based funding is distributed through the states, such laws could put an end to at least some of the taxpayer-funded bias practiced by the Salvation Army and other religious charities. Right now, very few people know that, thanks to Bush, a faith-based outfit can take tax dollars and then explicitly refuse to hire Jews, Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims. The issue needs far more publicity, and a political fight—or a series of them—would provide it. Better still, the campaign would contribute to the creation of a grassroots infrastructure—a network of people with political experience and a commitment to pluralism.

Progressives could also work on passing laws to mandate that pharmacists fill contraceptive prescriptions. (Such legislation has already been introduced in California, Missouri, New Jersey, Nevada, and West Virginia.) The commercials would practically write themselves. Imagine a harried couple talking with their doctor and deciding that they can't afford any more kids. The doctor writes a birth control prescription, the wife takes it to her pharmacist—and he sends her away with a religious lecture. The campaign could use one of the most successful slogans that abortion rights advocates ever devised: "Who decides—you or them?"

IN CONJUNCTION WITH local initiatives, opponents of Christian nationalism need a new media strategy. Many people realize this. Fenton Communications, the agency that handles public relations for MoveOn, recently put together the Campaign to Defend the Constitution, a MoveOn-style grassroots group devoted to raising awareness about the religious right. With nearly 3.5 million members ready to be quickly mobilized to donate money, write letters or lobby politicians on behalf of progressive causes, MoveOn is the closest thing liberals have to the Christian Coalition, but its focus tends

to be on economic justice, foreign policy and the environment rather than contentious social issues. The Campaign to Defend the Constitution intends to build a similar network to counter Christian nationalism wherever it appears.

Much of what media strategists need to do simply involves public education. Americans need to learn what Christian Reconstructionism means so that they can decide whether they approve of their congressmen consorting with theocrats. They need to realize that the Republican Party has become the stronghold of men who fundamentally oppose public education because they think women should school their kids themselves. (In *It Takes a Family*, Rick Santorum calls public education an "aberration" and predicts that home-schooling will flourish as "one viable option among many that will open up as we eliminate the heavy hand of the village elders' top-down control of education and allow a thousand parent-nurtured flowers to bloom.")

When it comes to the public relations fight against Christian nationalism, nothing is trickier than battles concerning public religious symbolism. Fights over crèches in public squares or Christmas hymns sung by school choirs are really about which aspects of the First Amendment should prevail—its protection of free speech or its ban on the establishment of religion. In general, I think it's best to err on the side of freedom of expression. As in most First Amendment disputes, the answer to speech (or, in this case, symbolism) that makes religious minorities feel excluded or alienated is more speech—menorahs, Buddhas, Diwali lights, symbols celebrating America's polyglot spiritualism.

There are no neat lines, no way to suck the venom out of these issues without capitulating completely. But one obvious step civil libertarians should take is a much more vocal stance in defense of evangelicals' free speech rights when they are unfairly curtailed. Although far less common than the Christian nationalists pretend, on a few occasions lawsuit-fearing officials have gone overboard in defending church/state separation, silencing religious speech that is protected by the First Amendment. (In one 2005 incident that got tremendous play in the right-wing press, a principal in Tennessee wouldn't allow a ten-year-old student to hold a Bible study during recess.) Such in-

fringements should be fought for reasons both principled, because Christians have the same right to free speech as everyone else, and political, because these abuses generate a backlash that ultimately harms the cause of church/state separation.

The ACLU already does this, but few hear about it, because secularists lack the right's propaganda apparatus. Liberals need to create their own echo chamber to refute these kind of distortions while loudly supporting everyone's freedom of speech. Committed Christian nationalists won't be won over, but some of their would-be sympathizers might be inoculated against the claim that progressives want to extirpate their faith, making it harder for the right to frame every political dispute as part of a war against Jesus.

The challenge, finally, is to make reality matter again. If progressives can do that, perhaps America can be saved.

WRITING JUST AFTER 9/11, Salman Rushdie eviscerated those on the left who rationalized the terrorist attacks as a regrettable explosion of understandable third world rage: "The fundamentalist seeks to bring down a great deal more than buildings," he wrote. "Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multiparty political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex." Christian nationalists have no problem with beardlessness, but except for that, Rushdie could have been describing them.

It makes no sense to fight religious authoritarianism abroad while letting it take over at home. The grinding, brutal war between modern and medieval values has spread chaos, fear, and misery across our poor planet. Far worse than the conflicts we're experiencing today, however, would be a world torn between competing fundamentalisms. Our side, America's side, must be the side of freedom and Enlightenment, of liberation from stale constricting dogmas. It must be the side that elevates reason above the commands of holy books and human solidarity above religious supremacism. Otherwise, God help us all. ■

MICHELLE GOLDBERG is a senior writer at Salon, where she has reported extensively on both sides of America's ever-seething culture war.

BY ANDREW STELZER

Anarchist Cheerleader Elected

In 1996, Cara Jennings, then 19, and her sister Aimee started the Radical Cheerleaders in their hometown of Lake Worth, Fla., a town of 35,000 north of Ft. Lauderdale. Their fishnet-stocking, punked-out leather outfits and shredded garbage bag pom-poms caught on, as did their

obscenity-laced chants against the neo-liberal agenda, the WTO and various other political causes. As the worldwide protest movement rose in the late '90s, the radical cheerleaders became fixtures at anti-globalization rallies, and cheerleading troupes have sprung up around the world.

For the past six years, Jennings, who works as a special needs program director at a local high school, has been very active in local politics. In late 2005 she decided to run for an open city commission seat. Despite being a self-proclaimed anarchist, Jennings came in second in the primary for the District 2 commission seat, and then won in a run-off against a well-funded darling of developers and the sugar industry.

In These Times spoke to Jennings when she was preparing for the evening's city commission meeting. Heading her agenda that night was creating a day labor resource center for immigrants, arranging permits for an upcoming immigration protest and making sure the city police act appropriately at the immigration rally.

After your victory, one headline read "Anarchist Activist Gets Elected to City Commission." How did that happen?

I've been active here in Lake Worth on a local level for six years, working on issues of affordable housing, helping to start some of the local community gardens, doing youth programs and attending a sick number of city meetings. So I've

made myself visible as a young person who's knowledgeable about things happening in the city. I looked at the other people who were running and I decided that I could do a better job. So I began door knocking and pounding the pavement, attending debates, and ended up winning an election.

You were running against the most well-financed candidate in the city. How did you manage to win against all that money?

On a local level, money doesn't necessarily buy an election. In our city, there are 35,000 people and only 15,000 registered voters. So by running a grassroots campaign, and mobilizing the social justice community that I've been active with for years, we were able to succeed despite the funding of my opponent. Of great interest to a lot of the voters was the fact that my opponent was funded by some very controversial developers here in town, as well as by one of the largest sugar barons in our country, the Fanjul family. Anyone down here who's concerned about the Everglades and the environment has a definite distaste for politicians who are funded by sugar dollars.

What issues did you run on?

I ran on having accessible and transparent local government; creating a plan to bring affordable housing to our town; ending gentrification, which is really sweeping our city; the need for a civilian police review board; the preservation of

open space and green space; and ending beach dredging, which is when you "replenish" the beach after storms have eroded it by bringing in sand from somewhere else. These are some of the larger issues here in town.

As just one of the five people on the city commission, how are you going to be able to turn things around?

One of my favorite things to say at the debates was that politicians don't solve community problems. We're simply a vehicle to help give the community access to the decision-making process, and to make sure that city resources are distributed equally. So I didn't make any guarantees to solve any problems, I simply told the community that I would do a lot of research and would make sure that I got their input before casting my vote on the commission. That's really what folks are looking for.

Your community is fairly small—you could knock on almost every door. What's your advice to people who live in bigger communities who want to get into electoral politics?

The irony of this whole situation is I didn't run with the absolute goal to win. I ran with the goal to use the electoral process as a way to talk to people in my community about issues that were really important. So if there's anyone out there who thinks they've got something to say and wants to address the voting public and non-voters alike, I highly recommend using election time to cause feisty debate about important issues.

How do you relate organizing your radical cheerleading troupe with what you're doing now?

Both are efforts to bring radical change to the current state of affairs. But clearly it's different in that now I'm part of city hall. I'm an elected official.

Something that was really uncom-



As a Lake Worth city commissioner, Cara Jennings says, "I'm wearing much more boring clothes than I did as a radical cheerleader."

fortable for me running for office is that a lot of campaigning is self-promotion, whereas with radical cheerleading, it was more promoting a concept or promoting a collective of people. I struggled with that the whole election, and went into the campaign as if I was running for a set of ideas and a set of policy changes. Even in winning I see it as a win for the community here, not so much as a win for myself, because really there's a lot of downside to winning public office. I'm wearing much more boring clothes than I did as a radical cheerleader. I'm not shaking things up with quite the same pizzazz as I used to. But who knows, maybe I'll find it just as valid as being a radical cheerleader.

Since you've been elected, have you had experiences that remind you that you are inside the power structure?

Absolutely. Like being the sole vote against an issue—like the construction of a new power plant—and remembering that the way the system is set up, it's not a collective run on consensus.

I didn't intend on winning, so I didn't have a plan of how I was going to accomplish all my ideas as a commissioner. How I can do it within the system is still unclear to me, because up until now, the way

I got things done was by shaming the city government into action, and now clearly I have to figure out a different technique to create the change I want to see.

The commissioner that you were elected to replace was quoted as saying, "If she can change her thinking somewhat and realize she can't change the world, maybe she'll do fine." How do you respond to that? Is another world possible?

The concept of thinking globally and acting locally is very common because it is a great way to create change. Promoting policies that do have an impact outside of our city, such as opposition to free trade agreements, or taking a stand against the war, or refusing to participate with Homeland Security, things like this that municipalities can take a stand on, have reverberations outside their city, especially in an area like South Florida, where little or no progressive policy is coming out of municipalities.

A lot of the headlines have focused on the fact that you are a self-described anarchist. How is that going to manifest itself in how you go about governing?

The textbook definition that most folks reference when they ask me about being

an anarchist is the overthrow of government. And that's an element of anarchism. I and other anarchists believe that there should be no hierarchy, and that all decisions should be made on a community level by individuals on a voluntary basis.

So it's been difficult running for office and acknowledging that I'm putting myself in a perceived and sometimes real position of power over other people. The reason that people are excited to see me out there, like at an immigration rally, is because they know, whether I like it or not, that I have additional power that they don't have. I don't want to claim the assumed power that comes with winning an elected office, but at the same time, I'm in this position to leverage that power, and be outspoken about things that are wrong and receive attention for that. I don't know really how you do that without falling into that trap of getting credit for a position of power that shouldn't exist in the first place. It's challenging.

I've seen a few comments on anarchist discussion boards on the Web, saying, "If she was a true anarchist, she wouldn't be part of government."

Sure. And I respect that critique. The practical reality is that in Lake Worth there's not a large anarchist community, and there's not even a large progressive community. So in order to make a better impact, I decided to run for office. I don't think it was the most anarchist thing to do, but it was a responsible thing to do.

The media outed me as an anarchist. It wasn't a secret—but for me it was more about the core issues that have a clear impact on people's day-to-day lives, not my philosophies about capitalism, or authority.

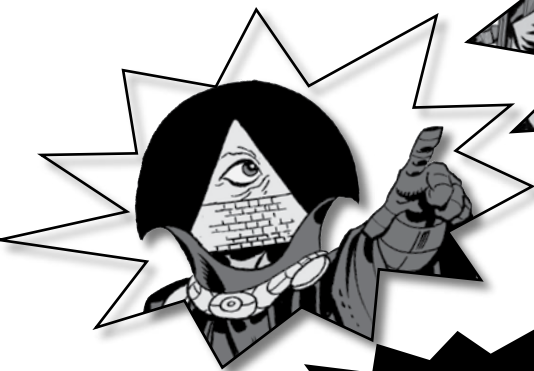
So when I went door knocking, people would say to me, "But you're an anarchist!" And I would get to have conversations about what it meant to be critical of the government and to oppose hierarchy, and to build public power, and to do that by running for office.

Now at least a portion of the population here in Lake Worth thinks that being an anarchist means that you're community driven, and that you are going to represent the interests of the people in the community, not the business interests. ■

ANDREW STELZER is a news reporter and anchor at community radio station WMNF in Tampa, Florida.



IMAGES COURTESY OF CARTOON NETWORK



BY SILJA J.A. TALVI

Pow! Shazaam! It's "Minoriteam"!

Dr. Wang is the epitome of nearly every Asian stereotype etched into American consciousness. His skin has a bright yellow cast; his eyes are set in an exaggerated slant. He owns a laundromat, speaks with a ludicrous accent, drives poorly and

is incredibly good at math.

But Dr. Wang is more than just your garden-variety racial caricature. On "Minoriteam," he is a crusading, wheelchair-bound superhero with a 40-pound brain, who uses profits from his laundromat to head up an equally preposterous group of ethnic superheroes devoted to overthrowing their nemesis: the omnipresent White Shadow.

"We use power of racial stereotype to destroy White Shadow," he cries out during one of the episodes. It's Dr. Wang's way of saying, perhaps, that Minoriteam is using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

"Minoriteam" debuted in March 2006 on Cartoon Network's late-night Adult Swim line-up. It's the col-

lective, nerdy brainchild of a bi-coastal trio of successful artistic misfits who share a love for '60s and '70s-era Marvel superhero comics.

The creative group consists of 30-year-old writer/actor/director Adam de la Peña (whose TV credits include "Jimmy Kimmel Live" and "I'm With Busey," among other projects); Peter Girardi, 39, who rose from his humble subway graffiti roots to earn widespread respect in the digital media and design world; and Todd James, 36, who also used subway cars as his artistic medium as a youngster, and then transformed those skills into a lucrative career in logo design for the cream of the hip-hop crop.

All three worked together on the absurdist Comedy Central hit, "Crank Yankers," before coming up with

the Minoriteam concept. To their initial surprise, Adult Swim executives jumped on their provocative pitch, green-lighting what has now turned out to be a two-year period of development and production.

Girardi, James and Peña knew that they were likely to take some heat from media and viewers for “Minoriteam’s” edgy content. But from the beginning of development to the end, they stress, they were never asked to tone down or censor any of the content by the head honchos at Adult Swim. That artistic freedom—and the general outrageousness of the other late-night adult cartoons on this station—is why all three creators say they can’t imagine “Minoriteam” finding a home on any other cable station.

The show was designed to provoke audiences with a heady combination of crass imagery and clever racial commentary—heavily sprinkled with the silly and ridiculous plot twists Adult Swim fans have grown to love. The late night block of programs features Aaron McGruder’s “Boondocks” on one end of the spectrum, with its vivid animation, political sophistication, and dark cynicism; at the other end is the wildly popular “Aqua Team Hunger Force,” which stars a talking wad of meat. (Sound bizarre? Consider that the piece of talking meat is a member of a nihilist household of fast-food characters who go on nonsensical adventures together.)

“There’s a way that people think we’re over all this [race] stuff, but we’re not,” says de la Peña. “We are still [facing] huge and tremendous issues—from race issues to the power of large corporations—and how all of that relates to personal identity. We still need to see that represented.”

“Minoriteam” tackles these issues via a motley group of superheroes modeled after the creative output of prolific writer and comic book artist Jack Kirby (1917-1994).

Born Jacob Kurtzberg, Kirby was known in the comic book world as “The King” for his work on such influential characters as the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, superheroes who typically rose up to defend the defenseless underdogs of society.

The “Minoriteam” style of animation mirrors Kirby’s use of bold contrasting colors, sharp angles, and jagged exclamation bubbles. But the comparisons end there, for what an over-the-top bunch they are. Forget the sexy-but-alienated X-Men, who use their mutations to control the weather, teleport, or rip through flesh and steel with wolverine-like claws. Members of the crude looking-and-talking Minoriteam have a set of stereotype-inspired superhuman strengths all their own.

There’s the sombrero-wearing El Jefe, a wealthy oil tycoon by day, who drinks tequila and uses the Leaf Blower 3000 to alternately propel him into flight or to vacuum up Minoriteam’s enemies. The shirtless Nonstop (ex-pro skateboarder and part-time convenience store clerk Dave Raj) wears a giant turban, flies on a magic carpet and has been shot so many times that he is now impervious to bullets altogether. Fasto is the Minoriteam’s superfly superhero; his tight shorts and duct-taped shoes enable him to move at lightning speeds and dance to distract and wow the white women thrown in his path. (By day, he is the nerdy Professor Dutton, who teaches Women’s Studies at Male University.) And then there’s the conflicted Neil Horvitz, a mailroom worker and avid student of Black

culture, history, soul food and statuesque Black women. Horvitz spends most of his time just trying to get on with his life. Unfortunately for him, an incident of racial oppression is all it takes for him to morph into Jewcano, a 63-year-old Moses lookalike, with rippling muscles and an awe-in-



spiring ability to spew boiling lava.

The object of Minoriteam’s hatred is White Shadow, a one-eyed, floating pyramid (reminiscent of a certain design on the back of U.S. currency) who is driven by one nefarious goal: to ensure that political and economic power remain in the hands of the very few—and the very white.

Part-man, part-corporation, White Shadow needs his own band of anti-heroes (his “minions”) to combat the Minoriteam. Among the regulars who line up to ensure continued white supremacy: a brutish Racist Frankenstein, the notoriously hard-to-climb Corporate Ladder and the race-biased Standardized Test.

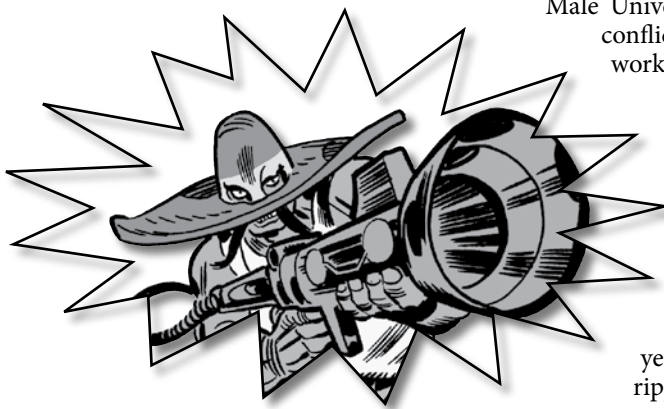
The outrageous scenes that emerge from the collusion of these forces are the furthest thing from what anyone would expect, and therein lies the draw. “Silly is subversive,” de la Peña says.

In “Operation Blackout,” White Shadow gets tired of African American-owned businesses, and hatches a scheme to kidnap the highly successful, utterly narcissistic black entrepreneur, Sebastian Jefferson. When the Minoriteam finally frees him in the show’s hilariously climactic end, Jefferson distances himself quickly from his rescuers because he thinks it’s bad for his status-and class-conscious image. “You look like a racist A-Team,” he says with disgust.

What’s up next for Minoriteam? The show is introducing its first female superhero, stronger and smarter than any of the males. It should come as no surprise, the creators divulge, that Dr. Wang and his cohort take all the credit for her hard work and superhero accomplishments.

Even the Minoriteam superheroes have some of their own issues to overcome. ■

SILJA J.A. TALVI isn’t a superhero but she plays one at In These Times.



read the latest underground classic

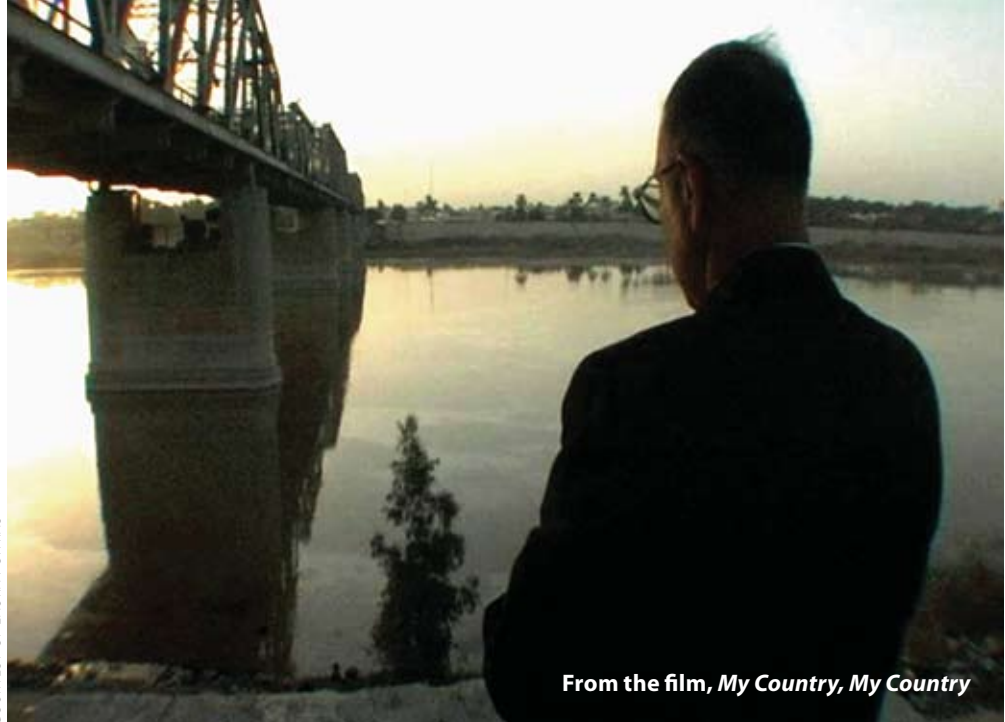
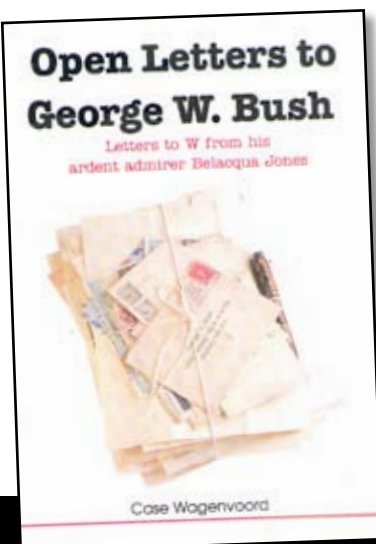
Imagine Karl Rove on methamphetamines and you have Bush's shadow advisor, Belacqua Jones. Belacqua peppers the president with daily letters of encouragement and advice in which:

- He praises the president's Eternal War of the Empty Policy
- He tells the president how to shoot Jesus full of theological steroids
- He mourns the martyrdom of St. Thomas De Lay

This is a must read for those seeking a dark vision of American politics and life seen through the cracked lens of substance abuse and a Neocon ideology run amok.

AVAILABLE AT AMAZON.COM

READ BELACQUA'S BLOG AT :
<http://blogs.salon.com/0004024>



COURTESY OF LAURA POITRAS

From the film, *My Country, My Country*

FILM

Iraq on the Big Screen

By Michael Atkinson

WHO SHOULD DEFINE what a war is "about"? By any ethical standard, that right should fall to the besieged—those who were waged upon, the people with the most corpses and the least to gain from combat.

Of course, in reality, an armed conflict's character is limned by the powerful, in whose mitts the media will, as we all know, contort, grind and dilute matters of truth to fit the message of the campaign.

The cold facts about the Iraq ordeal—from lies and sword-rattling to tens of thousands of murdered civilians and an increasingly dedicated "insurgency" (a misapplied word carefully chosen by the think tanks, and reflexively used by nearly every public voice)—are visible from a modest height. But that's not how media narratives would have us view this particular shitstorm. Instead, they frame the discussion around an array of other, smaller, more televisual issues: Are the U.S. soldiers being sufficiently armed, and adequately medicated? Are U.S. soldiers able to adjust to civilian life once they get home? How do U.S. soldiers "feel" about, well, everything?

TV being a crater, independent documentaries are sometimes our most

hopeful opportunity for actually jamming our feet into those on-the-ground boots we're always hearing about. But even this avenue, in even this stage of the Bush Administration's dying power, is subject to ideological market controls. Take three new films, each of them shot in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, amidst the U.S.-led force's efforts to simply deal with a native resistance that will not quit: Sean McAllister's *The Liberace of Baghdad* (2005), Laura Poitras's *My Country, My Country* (2006), and Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes* (2006).

While all three offer up an understanding of life in that war zone we'll never get from embedded network telejournalists, the differences between the first two and the last are significant: Whereas McAllister's and Poitras's first-person films are intimate with Iraqi civilians and, necessarily therefore, scaldingly anti-occupation, Scranton's audience-pleaser is assembled from footage soldiers shot themselves. *The War Tapes* is sometimes mordant and sometimes frightening, but it is only and wholly concerned with fresh-faced American operators among the inexplicably irate Arabs, who are merely scenery. Predictably, of the three movies, only Scranton's is winning film festival awards and gathering steam toward a probable theatrical release in this country.

Not that urban theaters have hurt for progressive documentaries in the last six years, but voicing contempt for the Bush Administration is a safe haven compared to prioritizing Iraqi citizens over the invading American hordes.

MacAllister's remarkable film captures the affable BBC filmmaker's bonding friendship with Samir Peter, a beloved, sophisticated Iraqi concert pianist living now in a Baghdad hotel basement and playing show tunes in the heavily guarded lobby for foreign journalists. Articulate, infectiously gregarious and ferociously unhealthy, Peter is every doc-maker's dream subject; he takes McAllister for savvy daytrips through the city that are rarely secure and frequently terrifying. The occupation is seen from the inside, as explosions shake kitchen windows and even cultured families become conscientious about stocking their home with defensive firearms.

Poitras's film is even meatier—with out inserting herself into the frame, she makes the definitive nonfiction film about the war, always managing to be where platoons of U.S. reporters are afraid to go. She follows a Sunni activist-doctor around the Sunni Triangle in the year leading up to the 2005 elections, even accompanying him to the fences around Abu Ghraib: "We're an occupied

country with a puppet government," Dr. Riyadh says to the pleading prisoners, "what do you expect?" Riding with the Kurds, listening to security contractors try to make sense out of chaos, sitting in Sunni living rooms as shells fall in the street—Poitras packs a month's worth of visual experience into 90 minutes.

The War Tapes, which has already reaped a trophy at the 9/11-conscious Tribeca Film Festival, is a more Spielbergian experience—fiercely manipulative, ragingly effective but, in the end, reassuring. The indie equivalent of a yellow ribbon magnet, the film intercuts the soldiers' digital footage with interviews with their families waiting for their return. You could be swept away by the working-class goodness and homespun heroism on display if you allow yourself. But your bubble ought to be tight, so as to avoid consideration, at least, of the mountains of Arab dead, and the mercenary self-regard of the participants, who care, as we're meant to, only about getting home, not about where they've been, what they've done or why. ■

BOOKS

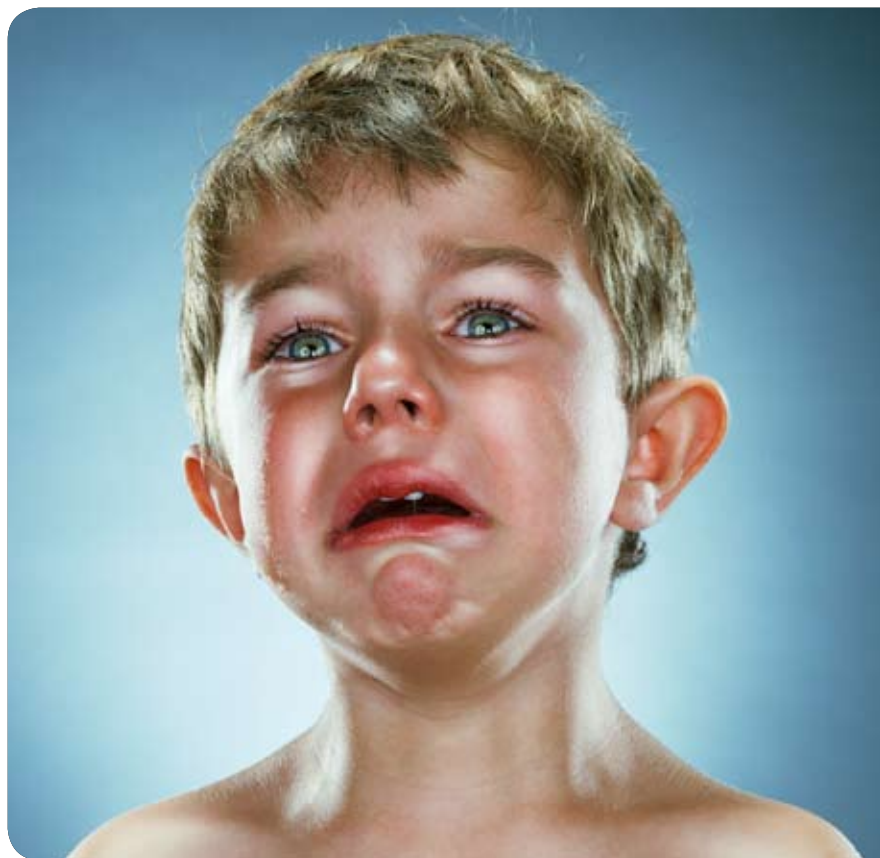
Renovation as a Way of Life

by Steve Weinberg

NEVER HAS A how-to home improvement manual contained so much deep thinking. Or, phrased another way, never has a philosophical tract about the relationship between human and house contained so much how-to home improvement advice.

Married in 1978 just after college graduation, David Owen and wife Ann Hodgman moved into a New York City apartment. They knew nothing about remodeling. Eventually, as babies arrived, remodeling and expanding became necessary. Owen found watching the carpenters, plumbers, electricians and other craftsmen fascinating. He learned how to design projects, then use tools to carry them out, through a combination of reading, question-asking, osmosis and hands-on experimentation.

[art space]



End Times, Jill Greenberg's solo photography exhibit, captures the anger, fear and sadness of children to reflect her concerns about the Bush administration's apocalyptic theology. Greenberg was photographing a friend's children when the son began crying. "When I got the film back I was drawn to the image of him looking appalled with his little hand covering his mouth," Greenberg says. "I decided to call it 'Four More Years.'" An internationally acclaimed photographer, Greenberg's previous work has included a series of monkey portraits exploring our evolutionary ancestors. *End Times* is drawing both praise and fire from critics. The exhibit will be on display at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles through July 8. For more information, visit www.manipulator.com.

A talented journalist, Owen wrote about his experiences for the *New Yorker*, then in his own books.

His latest, *Sheetrock & Shellac: A Thinking Person's Guide to the Art and Science of Home Improvement* (Simon & Schuster), is constructed around the family's renovation of an old house in rural Connecticut, plus the building of a getaway second home, often referred to as "the cabin," about 10 minutes away by automobile.

The practical tips are numerous; experiencing Owen's odyssey is like reading a manual with a literary bent. For example, after purchasing and installing a wooden porch railing, Owen noticed "a few piles of sawdust-like powder on the porch floorboards directly beneath the bottom rail." His research led to the conclusion

that wood-boring beetles had invaded. That conclusion leads to a detailed discussion about application of a product called Bora-Care, written in manual-ese, phrased in such a way that only a Ms. or Mr. Fix-it could comprehend. The adjacent paragraph, however, demonstrates Owen's usual clarity and insight, along with memorable detail:

If wood-boring beetles are left undisturbed, they can eventually do great damage. A friend showed me a photograph he had taken in Costa Rica of a restaurant building that the owner had attempted to protect from termites by tightly wrapping its beams in Saran Wrap. Rather than trying that, or anything else, I ignored my

problem for a full year, hoping that if I did nothing it would go away by itself, the way a cold does. But it didn't go away, and every time I swept away the little piles of frass [beetle excrement], more little piles of frass appeared. On a couple of occasions, I even found dead beetles, which looked like caraway seeds.

The philosophy scattered throughout the book—amidst beetle excrement and concrete mixing—is food for thought, as when Owen writes, "home improvement is an ongoing collaboration between a dwelling and its residents. Changing our apartment changed Ann and me, too, because remodeling works in two directions—as we shaped our living space, our living space shaped our lives. ... Remodeling and construction are human processes as well as structural ones, and they leave all the parties altered, just as marriages and lawsuits do. Ann and I set out to turn our apartment into the kind of place that we thought we wanted to live in, and we ended up meeting it halfway, by becoming the kind of people who, it turned out, would live in a place like ours."

Owen does not hurry a project, having learned that the most difficult task is "the last 10 percent of anything I start." He sees that as a positive: "Completion isn't the real goal of home improvement; you might as well yearn to be finished with your life. ... The fact that we're still at least 10 percent away from being finished is a good sign, not a bad one; it's life affirming. Every so often, I will run down a mental inventory of projects that I've either not finished or not begun, and feel



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comforted, rather than dismayed, that there is so much left to do.”

The philosophizing is certainly a form of social consciousness, and that is a plus. My wife, with her master’s degree in interior design and her considerable skill in hands-on remodeling, would agree with almost every Owen statement. That said, some readers—spartan-living me, for instance—will find Owen’s book too thin on environmental consciousness. Houses consume natural resources like trees; big houses, expanded houses, consume more than modest-sized houses. Houses take farmland out of circulation. Concentrations of new homes affect the water table adversely. Subdivisions cause visual blight. Houses fill up with material goods. Sales of evermore sophisticated dishwashers and refrigerators and vinyl tiles bolster the economy, but they also fuel out-of-control acquisitiveness for “stuff.”

Owen knows all that, surely. He is a smart guy and a delightful guide. Perhaps he kept environmental discussion at a minimum throughout the book because he felt reluctant to spoil his fun. ■

BOOKS

Literature Consumed

By Brian O’Grady

THE PHRASE “WHEN we need it most” seems to be showing up on a lot of dustjackets lately, though in response to exactly what is hard to say. We are simply living in dark times—and whatever political crisis is currently festering in America, it couldn’t hurt to salve the wound with a little literature.

George Saunders’ new story collection, *In Persuasion Nation*, has two such blurbs on its dust jacket. As it happens, Saunders’ work is likely to outlast the political era that spawned it. Several of these stories brush up against current events, and a political sensibility underlies the writing. But at their core these stories are concerned with ancient themes—love, pity, experience—whose reconciliation offers an alternative to the shouting match of contemporary culture.

Saunders is primarily an absurdist in the tradition of Samuel Beckett; the worlds he creates on the page

are prisons of narrow logic. Some of his characters exist in surreal settings—sit-coms, failing theme parks, corporate orphanages—and their exposure to the outside world is limited to brief, filtered moments. Others live in more realist states punctuated by elements of the absurd (ghosts, living corpses). Saunders isn’t technically experimental but he’s not a strict realist either. His worlds are saturated by free-market culture, in which humiliation trumps tenderness, and history is repackaged for an information economy.

In Persuasion Nation offers several terrifying visions of a new America where the soft sell has gone hard. In “Jon,” orphans are raised as guinea pigs for product-marketing testing; their adolescent emotions are tied, inextricably and pitifully, to market spots: “...her hair in braids, which I had always found cute, her being like that milkmaid for Swiss Rain Chocolate.” In “My Flamboyant Grandson,” characters are forced to watch commercials in public spaces (chips in their shoes call up personalized ads). When the narrator opts out, he is compelled to pay a fine or make up for lost time with his shoes on, “thus reclaiming a significant opportunity to Celebrate My Preferences.”

spin cycle

BY JESSICA CLARK AND TRACY VAN SLYKE

Let the Sunshine In

Congresspedia.com, “the citizen’s encyclopedia on Congress,” is a new clearing-house for everything you want to know—and want everyone else to know—about our elected officials. Built with Wiki software, it allows users to collaboratively add and remove information, and includes oversight from an editor.

Congresspedia’s users can update policymaker’s profiles, contact information and bios, and contribute to such sections as “Meet the Cash Constituents” and “Controversy.” It launched on April 26, the same day that its sponsor, the Sunlight Foundation, opened its

doors. The foundation’s mission is to give citizens “the power to root out corruption in Congress.” As of mid-May, the top pages for visitors have included—hold your breath—Duke Cunningham and Tom DeLay, as well as potential presidential nominees Hillary Clinton and John McCain.

The nonpartisan Wiki is housed at SourceWatch.org, which is sponsored by the Center for Media and Democracy. SourceWatch similarly allows citizens to create and update its directory of people, organizations and issues shaping the public agenda, including public relations firms, think tanks and more. The number

of daily visitors to the site has jumped to 48,000—up from the 28,000 daily visitors before the launch of Congresspedia.

Military Malarkey

“The American public will need to accept that certain information warfare tactics may not seem, on the surface, to be consistent with a global free press,” according to Simon Worden, the former head of the Pentagon’s controversial and short-lived Office of Strategic Influence.

Worden is a key character in “Mind Games,” the cover story of the May/June issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In it, Assistant Editor

Daniel Schulman outlines a series of recent efforts to foster “information warriors” in Iraq. One telling directive from 2003, the Information Operations Roadmap, called for “greater synergy” between public affairs, military information operations and psyops. As a result of this blurring, Schulman reports, misinformation designed to affect combat conditions now also regularly makes its way into news outlets.

“Increasingly,” Schulman writes, “the information environment has become the battlefield in a war that knows no boundaries.”

Saunders' signature style is choked with product names, giving his fiction a texture of both familiarity and weirdness. In the title story, a bag of Doritos, a "MacAttack" Mac & Cheese-loving grandson and an "innovative edible plastic product" called a "Slap-of-Whack bar" are confronted by the characters they've abused in their drive to sell. The unrelenting awareness of marketing culture (i.e., "persuasion nation") makes for a humor that is raucous and terrifying in its proximity to our own.

Readers with a sweet tooth for cultural satire will get their fix here, and yet none of these pieces, save "My Amendment," a riff on the 2004 same-sex-marriage-ban initiatives, is strictly political or humorous. Saunders' settings, which are at least half the fun, nonetheless support weightier subjects. Satirical polemics turn, on a dime, to existential meditations. In "CommComm," a military PR hack destroys evidence of an archeological site to secure a job at Homeland Security and discards the subsequent emotions as "Useless Guilt"—visualized as a pack of dogs running off a cliff. Meanwhile, the ghosts of his dead parents constantly relive their murder in his house. Behind the PR gags and Christian fundamentalist jokes runs a story about our relationship with grief.

The players in these dramas are often confronted with insane choices: Put your Everly shoes back on, or watch "Robust Economy, Super Moral Climate!"; get happy, or get written off the show. And yet Saunders' stories, generally, work themselves out by finding a third option. Characters find grace and tenderness on their way out of the cave.

Saunders exploits the ground between our daily reality and the hyperactive nightmare of commercial culture, in which common-sense ethics no longer function. The humor in these stories is more horrific than comic, and our response to it, which tends more towards a grimace than a belly-laugh, comes with a pang of guilt.

In "Brad Carrigan, American," which takes place on a TV show, a shock aesthetic has replaced the canned-laughter world of the title character. Brad lives between two arcs in the plot: in one, excess is the reward for individual and national accomplishment, while in the other Brad is haunted by the products of Western negligence and selfishness. Quite literally, in fact: Brad has dialogue with the charred corpses of Balkan civil-war victims as his neighbors have genitals im-

excerpt



Gut Check

Comedian Stephen Colbert's remarks at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner drew first nervous titters from the assembled reporters, and then critical reviews from their peers. Online, the "truthy" commentator—whose deadpan sendup of Bill O'Reilly and his copycats airs four nights a week on Comedy Central—was proclaimed a hero via sites like thankyoustephencolbert.org. Here is his opening salvo:

Madame First Lady, Mr. President, my name is Stephen Colbert and tonight it's my privilege to celebrate this president. We're not so different, he and I. We get it. We're not brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut, right sir? That's where the truth lies, right down here in the gut. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. I know some of you are going to say "I did look it up, and that's not true." That's 'cause you looked it up in a book.... Every night on my show, "The Colbert Report," I speak straight from the gut, OK? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument. I call it the "No Fact Zone." Fox News, I hold a copyright on that term.... As excited as I am to be here with the president, I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, ... what are you thinking, reporting on NSA wiretapping or secret prisons in Eastern Europe? Those things are secret for a very important reason: they're super depressing. And if that's your goal, well, misery accomplished. Over the last five years you people were so good—over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know and you had the courtesy not to try to find out.



planted in their heads, for a bit called "Extreme Surgery." The story comes close to preachiness, but Saunders follows through gracefully. The loud humor of the story is underpinned by a wash of shame and pity, from which one gets the sense that something else—something other than the crass calculus of have fun or fuck off—is possible.

In a 2004 *Believer* interview with Ben Marcus, Saunders wondered, "Are we writing as big as we need to write? Are we just spoiled-brat sneering aesthetes who are masturbating while looking away from the big questions of our age?" American writing, he claims, is stuck in a mode that privileges a narrow form of realism, precluding new approaches. "Life came brutally knocking at our door," he said, "and now we are reconsidering the venture."

That same year, much ado was made over the National Book Awards, whose fiction shortlist notably excluded books by Phillip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, John Up-

dike and Annie Proulx but included two books of interconnected short stories, one by Joan Silber and the other by Kate Walbert. Irritated critics snarled "experimental" and pointed to the authors' Manhattan addresses and their books' poor sales figures. But the 2004 Awards had touched a nerve, igniting a discussion among critics and writers about experimental writing, the awards process, and publishing in general.

Saunders is hardly an overlooked writer. He appears regularly in *Harper's* and the *New Yorker*, and Ben Stiller has optioned one of his screenplays. Nor is his writing breaking into new territory. But it's a writing against a staid form, loosely experimental, imaginative, humorous, political, and deeply humanist at once. The 2004 non-fiction NBA went to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, which concluded that those terrorist attacks were due in part to a "failure of imagination." Saunders, whose boundless imagination is alternately dark and bright, may be the writer we need now. ■

BY TERRY J. ALLEN

The Iraq War—On Drugs



WOUNDED U.S. SOLDIERS are being patched up and returned to battle before they are healed. The wounds in this case are to the psyche, caused by the trauma and horror that are as integral to

war as guns and death.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, when “suck it up” fails to snap a soldier out of depression or panic, the Army turns to drugs. “Soldiers I talked to were receiving bags of antidepressants and sleeping meds in Iraq, but not the trauma care they needed,” says Steve Robinson, a Defense Department intelligence analyst during the Clinton administration.

Sometimes sleeping pills, antidepressants and tranquilizers are prescribed by qualified personnel. Sometimes not. Sgt. Georg Anderas Pogany told *Salon* that after he broke down in Iraq, his team sergeant told him “to pull himself together, gave him two Ambien, a prescription sleep aid, and ordered him to sleep.”

Other soldiers self-medicate. “We were so junked out on Valium, we had no emotions anymore,” Iraq vet John Crawford told “Fresh Air” host Terry Gross. He and others in his unit in Iraq became addicted to Valium.

The issues around mental health and medication are exacerbated for the more than 378,000 troops who have served multiple tours to Iraq and Afghanistan. Post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) caused by a previous tour are cropping up in later ones.

“It concerns us when we hear military doctors say, ‘It’s wonderful that we have these drugs available to cope with second or third deployments,’” Joyce Raezer of the National Military Family Association told *In These Times*.

“But that statement makes military spouses cringe,” she continues, “Soldiers are saying ‘we don’t have time to recover.’”

Marine psychiatrist Cmdr. Paul S. Hammer confirmed to *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter Rick Rogers that Marines with PTSD are returning to Iraq.

In many cases, their problem is labeled stress. “Army docs have told me that commanders pressured them not to diagnose PTSD because it would cut into combat power—the ability to project men and women into war,” says Robinson. “The docs admit that the decision [to misdiagnose] is unethical, but are unwilling to take the huge career risk of becoming a whistleblower.”

“The military has an obligation to ensure your readiness,” says Raezer. “It is in its long-term benefit to have the person healthy.” But those goals may conflict with themselves and with reality. Ready for deployment is not the same as mentally healthy, and the army’s long-term interests smack hard against its need for warm bodies, no matter how dangerous continued action may be to an individual’s mental health.

All these factors promote that classic American solution: Better living through chemistry. When effective, antidepressants and sleeping pills can enable a soldier to get back in action—either from a huddle of terror and disgust, or increasingly, from back home to serve an additional tour.

But the use of brain-altering medications must be monitored for effectiveness and safety, which is beyond the Army’s capability in Iraq. The medications can take weeks to kick in, dangerously interact with other medications or fail to work at all. Side effects can include organ damage and thoughts of suicide.

But if the problem is bad for the oc-

cupying army, it is far worse for the Iraqi civilians, who have few medical resources and no end in sight to the constant fear and deprivation that occupation has brought.

“The [Iraqi] Ministry of Health says since the U.S. invasion there’s been a 35 percent jump in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder [in Iraqis],” reported NPR Baghdad correspondent Jamie Tarabay.

Keith Humphreys of U.S. Veterans Affairs documented a substantial rise in drug use in Iraq resulting from the terrible stress of daily life. Drugs that would require a prescription in the United States are available in drug stores and many Iraqis are turning to them for relief.

Former biology undergraduate Rorla Monere began taking sleeping pills to dull the pain and fear after witnessing the kidnapping of a close friend who was thrown into a car and later raped; a suicide car bomb left another of Monere’s close friends in a wheelchair. Afraid to go out, Monere stays at home, terrified that someone will storm the house.

“The pills don’t have any effect anymore,” she told NPR’s “Morning Edition,” “because I take so many of them. I just want my day to finish. I spend it alone. ... My wish is to die, to be free and rest. Better than this slaughter.”


Some U.S. soldiers know how she feels. In a May 2 letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) wrote, “Last year’s suicide rate was the highest since 1993. Eighty-three Army soldiers on active duty committed suicide, 25 while deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan—a 24 percent increase over the prior year. I find it simply astonishing that the sheer magnitude of the mental health crisis facing our Armed Forces does not compel you to action.” ■

Contact Terry J. Allen at tallen@igc.org

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Veronica Mars

Continued from backpage

when Lily was found with her head bashed in beside the family pool, Veronica's dad, the county sheriff, went after Jake as the killer and was voted out of office by a town looking to protect their local boy made good. Veronica's world fell apart. She became a pariah at school, shunned by the 'ogers for her father's betrayal of one of their own. Her mother, unable to cope with the family's loss of status and income, left without explanation.

This leaves Keith and Veronica inhabiting a small apartment in a motel-like complex and struggling to make ends meet through Keith's business as a private investigator. They try to put their lives back together after the trauma of murder, professional shame and what is in American society the ultimate taboo: downward mobility. (After catching a bail-jumper, Keith triumphantly proclaims: "Tonight we eat like the lower middle class to which we aspire!")

But by the beginning of Season Two, Keith's reputation has been resuscitated after his suspicions about the Kane case are (partially) vindicated, Veronica is dating Duncan again and the school's non-rich students are whispering that Veronica's previous outsider status was a pose. Weevil, the leader of the local Chicano bike gang, accuses her of slumming. Everything is thrown into turmoil when a bus from a school field trip crashes off a cliff, killing six local high school students. Of course, all the rich kids were spared. They'd hired a limo to drive them back to school because they didn't like the way the bus smelled.

MOVING BACK AND forth across Neptune's battle lines, Veronica occupies a unique position in the high school's social hierarchy. An aggressive, angry outsider with an outside reputation, she is loathed and feared by students and teachers alike, but because of her investigative savvy, has alliances with everyone from Weevil to Logan Echolls, a sociopathic rich kid who stages fights between homeless men and smashes in Veronica's headlights with a crowbar.

Her reputation as a crack detective puts her services in high demand, and like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, the noir heroes from whom she descends,

Veronica sees up close how the pathologies of class operate. Her clients range from Neptune's aristocracy to its immigrant strivers, all battling to come to grips with their appointed privileges and deprivations. In one episode, a spoiled, rich "A+ Student" hires Veronica to find out who is sabotaging her evening study

with a student and dumps her when she gets pregnant; and Duncan Kane, the ultimate icon of privilege, is unfailingly decent, compassionate and humane.

While setting all of this in a high school with angsty adolescents might have made the show absurd or silly, it somehow manages to complicate and deepen the con-

Veronica and her father try to put their lives back together after the trauma of murder, professional shame, and what is in American society the ultimate taboo: downward mobility.

time with car alarms and harassment. The culprit turns out to be the immigrant father of a fellow student who is competing for the full scholarship that will be awarded to the class valedictorian. Whereas A+ Student has a barrage of tutors at her disposal, his son has to work nearly full time at the family restaurant while keeping up his grades. His dad was just trying to level the playing field, and when busted, ends up forfeiting his son's scholarship.

In a later episode, Veronica is hired to catch a classmate's stepmother cheating on her rich husband and instead uncovers an Enron-style fraud. Before blowing open the scheme, she approaches the teacher who runs the school's investment club, who has unwittingly invested much of his own retirement money in the fraudulent company. Veronica urges him to dump the stock before she exposes the truth. "You don't dump it, Veronica," he says glumly. "You sell it. I'd just be sticking some other sucker with the consequences. I don't think I can live with that." The ordinary investors get left holding the bag, while the company's CEO escapes on a helicopter to some tropical island.

Of course, if the show was devoted exclusively to a sledge-hammer message about the perfidy of the ruling class, it would be boring propaganda, not art. But "Veronica Mars" never settles for cartoonish, political stereotypes: The working-class insurgent candidate for class president turns out to be a snitch who falsely accuses Veronica of drug use; the charismatic, liberal history teacher who critiques U.S. "imperialism" has an affair

traditions and drama. These are, after all, kids, not fully formed moral agents. Their petty cruelties and prejudices are at least partially redeemed by the fact that they are as much victims of their station in life as they are perpetrators. The viewer finds herself pushed and pulled between empathy and contempt.

Veronica's deeply conflicted feelings about the 'ogers with whom she at times frolics is another mind-bending mess of contradictions: She loathes them, she envies them, she wishes they'd take her back, she knows she's better off without them.

This is what makes the show so relevant at a time when our pop culture is pathologically obsessed with wealth and the sheer fabulousness of those who possess it: from NBC's "The Apprentice," to MTV's "My Super Sweet 16," to the shockingly durable fame of Paris Hilton, who, incredibly, appears in several early episodes of "Veronica Mars" as a particularly vapid and cruel 'ogers.

With an artfulness and pathos that no other show has quite pulled off, "Veronica Mars" expresses the deep ambivalence that the working and middle classes feel about the rise of a monstrously flush ruling class in our midst. In doing so, it makes manifest both the deep-seated class resentment that makes a populist political revolt seem so tantalizing possible and the Stockholm Syndrome-like admiration that makes it so maddeningly unattainable.

"I'd be the best rich person," Veronica muses. "I'd be the perfect combination of frivolous and sensible. Money is so wasteful on the wealthy." ■

VERONICA MARS, CLASS WARRIOR



BY CHRISTOPHER HAYES

PROGRESSIVES HAVE AN ANNOYING habit when it comes to pop culture. Anytime they fall for a particular TV show, movie or Top 40 hit, they proceed to spend inordinate amounts of time and mental energy convincing themselves that while most of what the corporate media produces is reactionary crap, this particular product is actually subversive, laced with a cutting critique of capitalism, patriarchy or the Bush administration.

I mention this only because I'm about to do the exact same thing. But of course, in this case, it's really, really true: My current television obsession, UPN's "Veronica Mars" (Tuesdays at 8 p.m. CST), is the single most compelling exploration of class anxiety and class friction on the little or big screen today. Its setting, the fictional southern California town of Neptune, is a prophetic vision of the Two Americas we are in the process of becoming—a "town without a middle class," as Veronica calls it in the pilot episode's opening moments, where "your parents are either millionaires or your parents work for millionaires."

A cross between *The Maltese Falcon*, "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Twin Peaks," "Veronica Mars" follows the adventures of its eponymous hero as she negotiates the twin perils of high school and her career moonlighting as a private investigator in her father Keith's firm. Each episode revolves around a caper, complete with clues, plot twists and betrayals. As in earlier noir tales, which feature a working-class private investigator navigating the shady dealings of a duplicitous elite and violent street toughs, everything that happens in the show is presented and viewed through a class lens. A war is raging between the "haves and the have-nots," Veronica says, and you "have to choose sides."

Veronica's loyalties are mixed. Once upon a time, she was a member of the rich kid clique (called the 'ogers, after the zip code they inhabit). Her boyfriend was Duncan Kane, son of billionaire software mogul Jake Kane, and her best friend was Duncan's sister Lily. But

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